

# **Brand co-creation in the fashion industry**

An SME perspective on collaborative brand building

International Business

Master's thesis

Author:

Jule Soini

Supervisor(s):

D.Sc. (Econ) Niina Nummela

D.Sc. (Econ) Anna Karhu

5.5.2026

Turku

Student's statement regarding the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for preparing and/or writing this thesis:

**I have not used any AI-based tools.**

**I have used AI-based tools.** Their use is documented in the Appendix. The AI tools were used in a way that complies with academic integrity guidelines.

The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

Master's thesis

**Subject:** International business

**Author(s):** Jule Soini

**Title:** Brand co-creation in the fashion industry

**Supervisor(s):** D.Sc. (Econ) Niina Nummela and D.Sc. (Econ) Anna Karhu

**Number of pages:** 91 pages + appendices

**Date:** 5.5.2026

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis was to examine how fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation and how co-creation influences brand development, stakeholder relationships, and community formation within small, value-driven fashion enterprises. The study focused on two Finnish fashion and design SMEs, Cuitu and AIDA Impact, which were selected as case companies due to their strong emphasis on sustainability, social responsibility, and community-oriented branding. The objective of the research was to explore how co-creation appears in practice, what kinds of opportunities and challenges it creates for SMEs and how collaborative practices contribute to contemporary fashion branding.

The study was conducted as a qualitative multiple-case study using an interpretivist research approach. The theoretical framework was built around brand co-creation, value co-creation, service-dominant logic and brand community literature. The empirical consisted primarily of semi-structured interviews with the founders of the selected companies and was supported by secondary material, including company websites, social media communication, public presentations and other brand-related content. The material was analysed through thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to collaboration, community, stakeholder interaction and branding practices. The findings indicate that co-creation in fashion SMEs is rarely implemented through highly formalised systems or structured co-design processes. Instead, co-creation appears as an embedded and relational practice shaped by continuous interaction, shared values, storytelling and long-term relationship building. The findings further demonstrate that co-creation does not necessarily weaken brand coherence or creative autonomy. Rather, both case companies maintained strong founder-driven identities simultaneously engaging customers, collaborators and communities in meaningful ways.

The thesis also highlights the central role of brand communities in collaborative brand building. In both cases, communities formed around shared values, authenticity, emotional connection and ongoing communication rather than formal membership structures. Social media and digital communication emerged as important environments for maintaining interaction, visibility, and community engagement. At the same time, the findings identified several challenges related to co-creation, including limited resources, balancing openness with creative control and maintaining brand coherence while growing.

**Key words:** Brand co-creation, fashion SMEs, collaborative brand community, value co-creation, fashion branding, stakeholder relationships, community building

Pro gradu-tutkielma

**Oppiaine:** Kansainvälinen Liiketoiminta

**Tekijä:** Jule Soini

**Otsikko:** Brand co-creation in the fashion industry

**Ohjaajat:** D.Sc. (Econ) Niina Nummela and D.Sc. (Econ) Anna Karhu

**Sivumäärä:** 91 sivua + liitteet

**Päivämäärä:** 5.5.2026

## Tiivistelmä

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli tarkastella Kuinka muotialan pk-yritykset hyödyntävät osallistavaa brändin yhteisluomista sekä miten yhteisluominen vaikuttaa brändin kehittämiseen, sidosryhmäsuhteisiin ja yhteisöjen rakentamiseen pienessä arvolähtöisissä muotialan yrityksissä. Tutkimuksen kohteena olivat kaksi suomalaista muoti- ja designalan pk-yritystä, Cuitu ja AIDA Impact, jotka valittiin tapausyrityksiksi niiden vahvan vastuullisuusajattelun, yhteisölähtöisen brändäyksen sekä sosiaalisen vaikuttavuuden vuoksi. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää, miten yhteisluominen ilmenee käytännössä, millaisia mahdollisuuksia ja haasteita se luo pk-yrityksille sekä miten yhteisölliset toimintatavat vaikuttavat nykyaikaiseen muotibrändäykseen.

Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena monitapaustutkimuksena tulkitsevalla tutkimusotteella. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys rakentui brändin yhteisluomisen, arvon yhteisluomisen, service-dominant logic-ajattelun sekä brändiyhteisöjä käsittelevän kirjallisuuden ympärille. Empiirinen aineisto koostui ensisijaisesti puolistrukturoiduista haastatteluista tapausyritysten perustajien kanssa. Haastatteluaineistoa täydennettiin sekundääriaineistolla, johon sisältyivät yritysten verkkosivut, sosiaalisen median viestintä, julkiset puheenvuorot sekä muu brändeihin liittyvä materiaali. Aineisto analysoitiin temaattisen analyysin avulla, minkä kautta tunnistettiin yhteistyöhön, yhteisöllisyyteen, sidosryhmävuorovaikutukseen ja brändäykseen liittyviä keskeisiä teemoja. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että yhteisluominen muotialan pk-yrityksissä ei yleensä ilmene muodollisina yhteissuunnitteluprosesseina tai tarkasti määriteltynä osallistamismalleina. Sen sijaan yhteisluominen näyttäytyy jatkuvana ja relationaalisena toimintana, jota rakentavat vuorovaikutus, yhteiset arvot, tarinankerronta sekä pitkäaikaiset suhteet sidosryhmien kanssa. Tulokset osoittavat myös, että yhteisluominen ei välttämättä heikennä brändin yhtenäisyyttä tai luovaa autonomiaa. Molemmat tapausyritykset säilyttävät vahvan perustajalähtöisen identiteetin samalla, kun ne osallistuvat aktiiviseen vuorovaikutukseen asiakkaiden, yhteistyökumppaneiden ja yhteisöjen kanssa.

Tutkimus korostaa lisäksi brändiyhteisöjen merkitystä osallistavassa brändin rakentamisessa. Molemmissa tapauksissa yhteisöt muodostuivat yhteisten arvojen, autenttisuuden, emotionaalisen samaistumisen sekä jatkuvan vuorovaikutuksen ympärille muodollisten jäsenrakenteiden sijaan. Sosiaalinen media ja digitaalinen viestintä näyttäytyivät keskeisinä ympäristöinä yhteisöllisyyden, näkyvyyden ja vuorovaikutuksen ylläpitämisessä. Samalla tutkimuksessa tunnistettiin useita yhteisluomiseen liittyviä haasteita, kuten rajalliset resurssit, avoimuuden ja luovan kontrollin tasapainottaminen sekä brändin yhtenäisyyden säilyttäminen kasvun aikana.

Tutkimus täydentää aiempaa kirjallisuutta tarjoamalla kontekstisidonnaisemman näkökulman osallistuvaan brändin yhteisluomiseen muotialan pk-yrityksissä. Tulokset osoittavat, että yhteisluominen luovilla pk-yrityksillä on vahvasti relationaalista, tulkinnallista ja arvolähtöistä toimintaa, joka ulottuu tuotekehityksen ulkopuolelle tarinankerrontaan, identiteetin rakentamiseen ja yhteisöjen muodostamiseen.

**Avainsanat:** brändin yhteisluominen, muotialan pk-yritykset, brändiyhteisöt, arvon yhteisluominen, muotibrändäys, sidosryhmäsuhteet, yhteisöllisyys

## Table of contents

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1	RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE	7
1.2	FASHION SMES AS RESEARCH CONTEXT	8
1.3	BRAND CO-CREATION AS THE FOCAL PHENOMENON	9
1.4	RESEARCH GAP AND QUESTIONS	11
1.5	MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY	12
<b>2</b>	<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1	COLLABORATIVE BRAND BUILDING IN FASHION SMES	14
2.2	BRAND CO-CREATION AND VALUE CO-CREATION IN BRANDING	16
2.3	THEORETICAL FOUNDATION FOR CO-CREATION	18
2.3.1	<i>Understanding brand value co-creation through S-D logic</i>	18
2.3.2	<i>SMEs Complementing S-D logic with the value co-creation logic of Prahalad &amp; Ramaswamy</i>	21
2.3.3	<i>Complementing S-D logic with the service logic presented by Grönroos</i>	22
2.3.4	<i>Integrated view of value co-creation: From ecosystems to individual and social participation</i>	23
2.3.5	<i>Co-creation through interaction and social-hedonic values within fashion SMEs</i>	25
2.4	BUILDING BRAND COMMUNITY IN FASHION SMES	27
2.4.1	<i>Defining brand community</i>	27
2.4.2	<i>Key relationships within brand community</i>	29
2.4.3	<i>Comparing brand communities and collaborative brand building in fashion SMEs</i>	33
2.5	SYNTHESIS	35
<b>3</b>	<b>RESEARCH DESIGN</b>	<b>41</b>
3.1	RESEARCH APPROACH	41
3.2	SELECTION OF CASES	43
3.2.1	<i>Case selection process</i>	43
3.2.2	<i>Case Cuitu</i>	46
3.2.3	<i>Case AIDA Impact</i>	48
3.3	DATA COLLECTION	49
3.4	OPERATIONALIZATION TABLE	52
3.5	DATA ANALYSIS	55
3.6	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	56
3.7	EVALUATION OF THE STUDY	57
<b>4</b>	<b>FINDINGS</b>	<b>61</b>
4.1	CUITU: VALUE-DRIVEN BRAND CO-CREATION IN PRACTICE	61
4.2	AIDA IMPACT: PURPOSE-DRIVEN BRAND CO-CREATION IN PRACTICE	64
4.3	CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS	67

<b>5</b>	<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>69</b>
5.1	THE ROLE OF BRAND CO-CREATION IN FASHION SMES	69
5.2	CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING BRAND CO-CREATION	70
5.3	OPPORTUNITIES EMERGING FROM CO-CREATION	71
5.4	BRAND COMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY-BASED CO-CREATION	72
5.5	CROSS-CASE ANALYTICAL REFLECTIONS	74
<b>6</b>	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>77</b>
6.1	THEORETICAL CONCLUSIONS	78
6.2	CONTRIBUTION TO PREVIOUS LITERATURE	79
6.3	MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS	80
6.4	LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	81
<b>7</b>	<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>83</b>
	<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>85</b>
	<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>92</b>

### List of figures

FIGURE 1	S-D LOGIC VALUE CO-CREATION MODEL (VARGO AND LUSH 2016)	20
FIGURE 2	INTEGRATED VIEW OF VALUE CO-CREATION	23
FIGURE 3	KEY RELATIONSHIPS OF BRAND COMMUNITY (MCALEXANDER ET AL. 2002)	29
TABLE 1	CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF BRAND CO-CREATION IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY	39
TABLE 2	KEY FINANCIAL AND COMPANY INFORMATION OF CUITU OY	47
TABLE 3	KEY FINANCIAL AND COMPANY INFORMATION OF AIDA IMPACT	48
TABLE 4	CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS	50
TABLE 5	OVERVIEW OF DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL USED IN THE EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS	51
TABLE 6	OPERATIONALIZATION TABLE	54

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Research background and relevance

In the contemporary markets, branding has increasingly moved from a firm-controlled activity toward a more relational and participatory approach. Consumers are no longer passive recipients of brand messages but active contributors who engage with brands through interaction, dialogue, and shared meaning-making. Recent branding research reflects this shift, emphasizing the move away from managerial control toward more dynamic and collaborative brand paradigms (Holt, 2002, 70-72; Siano, Vollero & Bertolini, 2022, 3–5). Digitalization and social media have further accelerated these developments by enabling continuous interaction between firms and their stakeholders (Le, Phan Tan & Hoang, 2025, 2–4). As a result, companies are increasingly required to reconsider how brand value is created, negotiated, and sustained through relationships rather than unilateral communication.

Framing this research into the context of the fashion industry provides a particularly relevant context for examining these changes. Fashion brands operate at the intersection of culture, creativity, and commerce, where products often function as symbolic carriers of identity, values, and social meaning rather than purely utilitarian goods. Brand value in fashion is therefore closely linked to emotional engagement, aesthetic expression, and social interaction (Cova & Cova, 2012, 154–155). At the same time, the industry is undergoing significant transformation driven by intensified global competition, shifting consumer expectations, and growing demands for transparency and responsibility. These developments have increased the importance of branding approaches that emphasize participation and engagement rather than traditional top-down management.

These dynamics are especially interesting for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Fashion SMEs typically must operate with limited financial and organizational resources while competing in markets dominated by the larger global competitors. However, their smaller scale also enables flexibility, authenticity, and close relationships with customers and other stakeholders. Prior research suggests that SME brands are often closely intertwined with founders' values and personal identities, making relational and interaction-based branding particularly relevant in this context (Astner & Gaddefors, 2024, 106–107). For such firms, collaborative approaches to branding may offer opportunities for differentiation, innovation, and long-term value creation without reliance on extensive marketing investments.

Against this backdrop, brand co-creation has emerged as a particularly relevant phenomenon. Co-creation highlights how brand value is not produced only by firms but is generated through the exchange between companies and their stakeholders. For fashion SMEs, this perspective aligns with the experiential and social nature of fashion consumption, where meaning is continuously negotiated through participation, dialogue, and shared practices. Understanding how such firms participate in collaborative brand co-creation is therefore both timely and significant.

## **1.2 Fashion SMEs as research context**

The fashion industry forms part of the broader creative industries, a sector that is inherently challenging to define due to its diverse organizational forms, value creation mechanisms, and reliance on brand assets. Creative industries are commonly characterized by high levels of symbolic value, innovation, and cultural relevance, where creativity functions as a central organizational resource. Previous research on creative SMEs highlights that understanding such enterprises requires attention to organizational creativity, defined as the collective generation of new, valuable, and useful ideas, products, or processes within complex social systems (Lavoie & Abdunour, 2016, 31–33). In this context, creativity is not limited to individual expression but emerges through collaboration among individuals with diverse skills, experiences, and perspectives (Cheung & Wong, 2011, 913).

Within the creative industries, fashion represents a particularly dynamic and competitive field. Fashion companies operate in markets shaped by rapid trend cycles, aesthetic differentiation, and intense symbolic competition. In recent years, these conditions have been further increasing through economic uncertainty, shifting consumer behaviour, and structural changes in global markets. Industry analysts suggest that rising inflation, increased price sensitivity, sustainability pressures, and evolving consumption patterns have created a challenging operating environment for fashion brands, particularly SMEs (McKinsey & Company, 2024). While growth opportunities continue to exist, achieving differentiation and long-term viability has become increasingly complex.

These challenges are especially noticeable for small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the fashion sector. Fashion SMEs typically face significant resource constraints compared to larger multinational brands, limiting their ability to compete through large-scale marketing investments or standardized branding strategies. At the same time, research suggest that creative SMEs often possess organizational characteristics that enable adaptability, experimentation, and close stakeholder relationships (Harc et al., 2019, 1570–1571). SMEs size and flexible structures can support more

informal interaction, faster decision-making, and closer engagement with customers, creative partners and local communities.

From a branding perspective, these conditions place particular emphasis on approaches that move beyond traditional product-focused differentiation. As competition intensifies and consumers become less responsive to purely functional attributes, experiential, emotional, and relational aspects of branding gain increased importance. Research indicates that consumers in fashion markets increasingly seek brands that offer meaningful experiences and align with their values, rather than focusing only on product quality or price (Kim & Sullivan, 2019, 12). For fashion SMEs, responding to these expectations requires branding practices that actively engage stakeholders and leverage interaction as source of value creation.

Furthermore, wider societal changes have heightened the importance of collaborative approaches in the fashion industry. Growing attention to sustainability, ethical production, and corporate responsibility has increased pressure on fashion firms to demonstrate transparency and alignment with consumer values. For SMEs in particular, these demands can be difficult to address through conventional branding alone. Existing studies demonstrate that collaborative practices, encompassing knowledge sharing and stakeholder engagement, contribute to innovation and stronger market positioning by enabling firms to better meet complex and value-oriented consumer expectations (Purwandari et al., 2022, 80–83; Nayak et al., 2021, 311–316). Taken together, these characteristics make fashion SMEs a highly relevant context for examining contemporary brand-building practices. The combination of creative intensity, market volatility, resource constraint, and close stakeholder relationships creates conditions in which collaborative approaches to branding are not only possible but often necessary. As such, fashion SMEs provide a meaningful and interesting empirical setting for exploring how brand co-creation is approached and enacted in practice.

### **1.3 Brand co-creation as the focal phenomenon**

Fashion SMEs operate in highly creative, fast-paced environments with close stakeholder interaction, where traditional, firm-led branding models based on one-way communication are increasingly insufficient. Instead, branding is increasingly understood as a relational process in which meaning and value are shaped through ongoing interaction between companies and their stakeholders (Siano et al., 2022, 373–378). This shift has brought the concept of brand co-creation to the forefront of contemporary branding research.

Brand co-creation refers to processes through which brand value and meaning are jointly developed by firms and stakeholders through interaction, rather than being unilaterally defined by the company (Iglesias et al., 2013, 7–10). In contrast to conventional branding approaches, co-creation highlights participation, dialogue, and shared authorship. Stakeholders are not viewed purely as recipients of brand messages, but as active contributors whose experiences, interpretations, and actions influence how brands are formed and perceived (Le et al., 2022, 1040–1045). This perspective is particularly relevant in industries where symbolic value, identity, and experience play a central role, such as fashion.

For SMEs, brand co-creation offers both opportunities and challenges. One perspective to highlight is that small to medium-sized enterprises lack the resources required for large-scale branding campaigns and standardized brand management systems. On the other hand, their smaller scale, flexible structures, and proximity to customers enable more direct and meaningful interaction. Recent research proposes that these characteristics make co-creation particularly compatible with SME branding, as value co-creation often emerges through close stakeholder relationships rather than formalized brand strategies (Juntunen, 2025, 265–271). It is necessary to also differentiate brand co-creation from related concepts that are often used interchangeably in academic and managerial discourse. While collaboration broadly refers to actors working together toward shared objectives, co-creation specifically emphasizes the joint creation of value through interaction. Similarly, brand communities describe social structures formed around shared interest in a brand, whereas brand co-creation focuses on the processes through which such interactions contribute to brand development (Siano et al., 2022, 373–378).

In this thesis the concepts discussed above are treated as related but analytically distinct, with brand co-creation serving as the primary focus. Within the context of fashion SMEs, brand co-creation can manifest in multiple forms, including stakeholder participation in storytelling, communication practices, and the articulation of brand values. These practices mirror the wider transition from perceiving brands as static managerial entities to recognizing them as dynamic and socially embedded phenomena. Examining brand co-creation in this context therefore enables a deeper understanding of how contemporary branding practices emerge at the intersection of organizational intent, stakeholder interaction, and cultural meaning. Brand co-creation provides a suitable analytical lens for exploring how fashion SMEs navigate contemporary branding challenges. By focusing on co-creation as a relational process rather than a predefined strategy, this study positions branding as an ongoing

practice shaped by interaction, participation, and shared meaning-making. This perspective forms the foundation for identifying the research gap discussed in the following chapter.

#### **1.4 Research gap and questions**

Research on brand co-creation has expanded significantly over the past two decades, reflecting broader shifts in branding theory toward relational, participatory, and value-based perspectives. Recent research indicates that co-creation is now widely recognized as a central element of contemporary branding, particularly in contexts shaped by digital interaction and increased stakeholder participation (Le et al., 2022, 1039–1046; Siano et al., 2022, 373–380). Much of this research has contributed important insights into how consumers react towards brands and how participation influences brand meaning and value creation.

Despite these advancements, existing research has tended to prioritize the perspective of customers, often seeing co-creation as a form of consumer engagement or interaction with brand platforms. While this focus has enriched understanding of participatory branding, it has also resulted in less attention to the organizational and managerial perspectives of co-creation. There is limited empirical research that examines how firms themselves understand, implement, and navigate brand co-creation as part of their branding practices (Le et al., 2022, 1039–1046). This imbalance is especially visible in research focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises. Branding research has historically been dominated by studies of large organizations and global brands and SMEs especially the ones within creative industries have been overlooked. Recent conceptual work highlights that SME brand co-creation differs fundamentally from that of larger firms because of resource constraints, informal structures, and closer stakeholder relationships (Juntunen, 2025, 265–272). However, empirical studies examining how small to medium-sized enterprises approach brand co-creation in practice remain relatively scarce, especially within industry-specific contexts.

Within the fashion industry, this gap becomes even more evident. Fashion branding research has often addressed issues such as identity constructions, symbolism, and consumer culture, yet fewer studies have explored how fashion SMEs engage in brand co-creation as an organizational process. Moreover, while concepts such as brand community and co-creation are frequently discussed in parallel, their intersection has seldom been researched from the perspective of smaller fashion firms operating in highly dynamic and value-driven markets (Siano et al., 2022, 373–380). Existing literature suggests a need for more context-sensitive and organization-focused research on brand co-creation. There is a lack of empirical insight into how SMEs understand collaborative brand building,

the challenges they face in implementing co-creative practices, and the opportunities such practices create for brand development. Addressing this gap contributes to a more in depth understanding of brand co-creation as a relational and socially embedded process, while placing greater attention to SME branding context in the recent literature.

Based on the identified research gap, this study aims to examine brand co-creation from the perspective of small and medium-sized enterprises operating within the fashion industry. The primary objective is to gain a deeper understanding of how collaborative brand-building practices are approached and enacted by fashion SMEs in contemporary market contexts.

The main research question of this study is:

How do fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation?

To address this question, the study is guided by the following sub-question:

1. What is the role of brand co-creation in the fashion industries?
2. What are the challenges of implementing brand co-creation strategies in the fashion industry?
3. What opportunities arise from implementing brand co-creation strategies in the fashion industry?

These questions are designed to capture both the strategic and practical dimensions of brand co-creation in fashion SMEs. By examining the role, challenges, and opportunities associated with collaborative brand co-creation, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how this phenomenon unfolds within specific organizational and industry context of fashion SMEs.

## **1.5 Motivation for the study**

In addition to its academic relevance, this study is motivated by a personal interest in fashion as a cultural and communicative phenomenon. Fashion has long functioned not only as a commercial industry but also as a medium through which identities, values, and social meanings are expressed and negotiated. This perspective has shaped the interest in branding practices that extend beyond traditional marketing and communication and engage broader cultural and social dimensions.

The interest was further reinforced through exposure to fashion brands that approach branding as a form of cultural production rather than solely as product promotion. One illustrative example is 032c, a brand that operates in the intersection of fashion, editorial content, and contemporary culture. Its way of combining products with publishing, community engagement, and cultural discourse prompted reflection on how brand meaning can be shaped collaboratively through interaction with audiences and creative communities. While such examples do not inform the empirical design of this study, they served as an initial point of inspiration that raised broader questions about participation, value creation, and shared authorship in branding.

These reflections motivated a deeper academic interest in brand co-creation as a contemporary branding logic, particularly within the context of small and medium-sized enterprises operating in creative industries. The research questions addressed in this thesis are therefore grounded not in individual brand cases, but in existing literature and empirical inquiry, aiming to contribute to a more systematic understanding of how fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation.

## **2 Literature review**

This chapter develops the theoretical foundation for researching how fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation. The literature review focuses on branding as a relational and participatory process and highlights how contemporary value creation increasingly involves interaction between firms and stakeholders. The review on this research discusses collaborative brand building in the context of fashion SMEs from a broader perspective and from there outlines key perspectives on brand co-creation and value co-creation. The theoretical foundations of the study are established through service-dominant (S-D) logic and complementary frameworks that support understanding co-creation both as an ecosystem-level phenomenon and as an interaction-based process. Finally, the chapter explores brand community as a social context in which co-creation is sustained and amplified, especially within experience-driven markets such as fashion. In conclusion, this chapter presents a synthesis that establishes the conceptual framework guiding the empirical study.

### **2.1 Collaborative brand building in fashion SMEs**

Collaborative brand building represents a contemporary approach to branding in which value and meaning are shaped through interaction between firms and stakeholders rather than created solely through managerial control. In increasingly competitive and saturated markets, companies are required to develop brand identities that are not only recognizable but also socially and culturally relevant. As branding shifts from one-directional communication toward dialogue and participation, collaborative approaches become important in the development exceptionally meaningful and resilient brands. In this context, collaboration can be understood as a strategic orientation that enables companies to build their brand through shared processes such as stakeholder interaction, relationship-building, and continuous change. Rather than treating stakeholders solely as targets of marketing, collaborative brand building positions them as active participants who can contribute to brand narratives, legitimacy, and innovation.

This new shift aligns with contemporary branding perspectives where brand value is no longer constructed exclusively inside the firm but emerges through engagement and shared meaning-making (Ind et al. 2013, 7–12; Markovic et al., 2022, 532–536). For SMEs, collaborative brand building can be particularly relevant due to their organizational characteristics and constraints. Compared to large corporations, SMEs often have fewer resources to invest in traditional brand management, large-scale campaigns, or standardized market positioning. At the same time, their smaller size enables

flexibility, faster decision-making, and closer relationships with customers and local ecosystems. In creative industries such as fashion, this relational closeness often becomes a key competitive asset, allowing SMEs to engage stakeholders more directly and authentically. These dynamics make it possible for smaller fashion enterprises to build brands through collaboration in ways that may be difficult to replicate for larger, more established organizations (Millspaugh & Kent, 2016, 324–331).

Fashion SMEs operate in markets where symbolic value, identity expression, and emotional engagement play a central role. Consumers do not only purchase products but also relate to brands as cultural and social actors. This creates conditions in which collaboration becomes not only a strategic tool but also a natural part of brand formation, as stakeholders contribute to how brands are interpreted, experienced, and communicated. In highly competitive markets, collaborative brand building can support differentiation by enabling firms to create experiences and narratives that resonate with value-driven consumer expectations (Kim & Sullivan, 2019, 3–9). Collaborative brand building is increasingly also connected to sustainability and responsibility, which have become central drivers of consumer trust and brand legitimacy in fashion markets. Fashion SMEs face growing pressure to align with sustainability expectations through sourcing, transparency, and ethical practices.

In a context where these dimensions are being considered, collaboration can serve to integrate stakeholder perspectives into brand development and strengthen the credibility of brand values. Research suggest that collaborative models can help SMEs share knowledge, resources, and capabilities, supporting both innovation and market positioning in changing environments (Purwandari et al., 2022, 80–83; Nayak et al., 2021, 311–316). As such collaborative brand building can be understood as an approach through which fashion SMEs respond to both economic pressures and value-driven shifts in consumption. Collaborative brand building provides an important foundation for understanding brand co-creation in fashion SMEs by highlighting the increasing relevance of relational approaches to branding and establishes the link between stakeholder engagement and brand development.

In recent branding research, the need to conceptualise co-creation specifically with branding contexts has received increasing attention. Sarasvuo et al. (2022, 546–553) highlight that co-creation in branding cannot be reduced to isolated interaction activities but should be understood as a dynamic process in which stakeholders participate in shaping brand meaning through multiple forms of influence. This perspective supports the view that collaborative brand building provides more than

an operational approach to stakeholder engagement as it forms the foundation for understanding how brand value and identity are continuously negotiated and co-created. Building on this conceptualisation, the next section focuses more explicitly on brand co-creation and value co-creation as analytical tools for examining collaborative brand-building processes in fashion SMEs.

## **2.2 Brand co-creation and value co-creation in branding**

Building on chapter 2.1, the concept of brand co-creation offers a more specific analytical point of view for understanding how brand meaning and value emerge through stakeholder participation. In contrast to traditional firm-centric branding, co-creation emphasizes that value is not embedded in products or controlled solely through managerial decision-making but rather constructed through interaction between companies and multiple actors in the market. The creation of superior value therefore requires effective stakeholder engagement and continuous relational exchange between firms and their audiences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, 5–14).

Co-creation has been widely discussed as an approach to innovation and value creation that relies on collaboration between firms, customers, suppliers, and other partners. Rather than viewing companies as independent producers of value, co-creation offers a perspective where brands are evolving entities shaped through dynamic and interactive relationships. Through this perspective, branding can be seen as a shared process in which stakeholder do not only respond to brand communications, but actively influence the brand's identity, meaning, and perceived value through participation (Ind, Iglesias & Shultz, 2013, 7–13). This perspective is particularly relevant in creative industries such as fashion, where brands are strongly linked to cultural meaning, identity expression, and emotional engagement.

From a marketing perspective, collaboration can be understood as an activity that creates synergy, leverages resources, and generates better outcomes than isolated efforts (Rahayu et al., 2020, 79–83). These collaborative practices extend the logic of relationship marketing by highlighting that value creation is not limited to firm-customer interaction but can include a broader network of stakeholders. Stakeholder-oriented branding emphasizes that value emerges through interactions within actor networks, including suppliers, employees, local communities, and creative partners (Markovic et al., 2022, 535–538). For SMEs, such collaboration is often not only beneficial but necessary, as smaller firms frequently depend on ecosystem relationships and informal partnerships to build competitive advantage in fast-moving markets.

Recent branding research supports this view by highlighting the need to conceptualise co-creation focusing especially within the context of branding. Sarasvuo et al. (2022, 548–555) argue that co-creation in branding should not be reduced to isolated interaction activities but instead should be seen as an ongoing process in which stakeholders influence brand meaning through multiple forms of participation. This shifts the perspective from co-creation as a managerial tool toward co-creation as a relational and socially embedded branding phenomenon. Similarly, Siano et al. (2022, 373–380) describe branding as a field that is increasingly moving away from brand control paradigms toward co-creative brand perspectives, emphasising shared authorship and stakeholder influence.

In parallel, the increasing role of digital platforms has increased co-creation processes by enabling continuous brand interaction and participatory communication. Social media environments have become influential in forming brand narratives, as consumers can co-create, interpret, and disseminate brand meanings beyond managerial intentions. Le et al. (2022, 1040–1048), in their review, highlight that brand co-creation on social media is strongly linked to user-generated contents, engagement practices, and interactive brand experiences, reinforcing the view that contemporary branding cannot be separated from stakeholder participation. Especially when viewing the fashion market, brand communication is often shaped through cultural conversation and community-based interpretation, making co-creative interaction a central branding mechanism.

For SMEs, these developments introduce both new opportunities and increased complexity. While co-creation can strengthen brand relevance, authenticity, and stakeholder commitment, it may also challenge traditional branding practices by requiring openness, and continuous relational work. Recent conceptual developments support the relevance of examining co-creation specifically in SME contexts, where value creation is often informal, relational, and embedded in local and cultural ecosystems (Juntunen, 2025, 265–272). As a result, SME brand co-creation cannot be completely understood through models developed in large corporate contexts alone. Instead, it is mandatory to focus the attention to the practices through which smaller firms engage stakeholders in shaping brand meaning and value as part of everyday brand building.

The literature suggests that brand co-creation represents a shift towards participatory value formation in branding, where brands evolve through continuous interaction and multi-actor engagement. This provides a strong foundation for the present study, which explores how fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation and how such practices create challenges and opportunities for brand development. To deepen the understanding of this topic further, the following section introduces

theoretical foundations of value co-creation, focusing on service-dominant logic and complementary frameworks that explain how value emerges through interaction.

## **2.3 Theoretical foundation for co-creation**

To further develop the conceptual grounding for examining brand co-creation in fashion SMEs, this section introduces the key theoretical perspectives that explain how value emerges through interaction between firms and stakeholders. While the previous sections established co-creation as a contemporary branding approach, understanding its underlying mechanisms requires engagement with broader theoretical frameworks that conceptualise value as a relational, dynamic, and socially constructed. At the core of this discovery, lies the service-dominant (S-D) logic, which challenges traditional goods-centred views of value creation by positioning value as something that emerges through use and interaction rather than being embedded in product (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 1–11). From this perspective, firms do not deliver value directly but instead provide value propositions that enable stakeholders to participate in value creation processes. This shift from firm-centric interaction-based thinking provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding collaborative branding practices, particularly in contexts such as fashion SMEs where stakeholder engagement plays an important role.

S-D logic alone does not provide a fully captivating picture of the experiential and social dimensions of co-creation relevant to branding. Complementary perspectives, that are presented in this study, including Prahalad and Ramaswamy's co-creation logic and Grönroos's service logic, contribute additional insights into how value emerges through dialogue, shared experiences, and relational processes. Together, these perspectives provide a multi-level understanding of co-creation that combines systemic, experiential, and interaction-based views of value formation. Building on these foundations, the following subsection synthesises these theoretical approaches to explain how co-creation operates both as a strategic orientation and as an everyday practice shaped by interaction, participation, and social meaning-making.

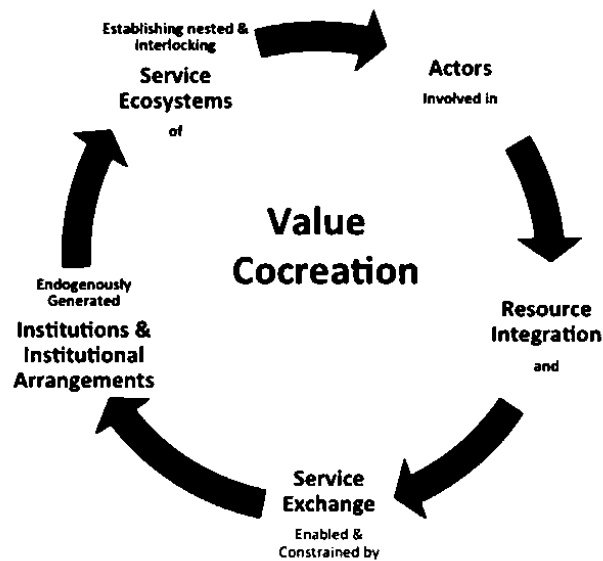
### **2.3.1 Understanding brand value co-creation through S-D logic**

Over the past several years, two major theoretical orientations within S-D logic have emerged for capturing the dynamic structures of markets (Vargo & Lush, 2016, 5–15). The first orientation is the concept of service ecosystems, which proposes that value creation and service delivery occur within interconnected networks of actors rather than in isolation. These ecosystems function thorough

ongoing processes of service-for-service exchange and resource integration. Viewed from this perspective, a service ecosystem is a dynamic, self-organizing network in which actors collaborate and integrate resources to promote both individual and collective wellbeing (Vargo & Lush, 2016). This approach shifts the understanding of value creation beyond dyadic exchange and highlights the interconnected and systemic nature of contemporary market relationships.

The second key orientation in the updated view of S-D logic centers on institutional theory. At its core, this perspective emphasizes that the coordination of resource integration and service-for-service exchange in value co-creation depends on institutions and institutional arrangements. One of the central insights here is that value cocreation is not random or isolated but is systematically coordinated through shared rules and norms within interconnected ecosystems of actors, leading to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of value creation processes. Moreover, Vargo and Lush (2025) highlight that the exploration of service ecosystems and institutions within the framework of S-D logic is still in its early stages, and these concepts are expected to become a central focus of metatheoretical research over the next decade. A key challenge moving forward is transitioning S-D logic from a high-level conceptual model to a more actionable framework. This calls for the development of midrange theories, those that bridge the gap between abstract, overarching ideas and practical, testable applications, making S-D logic more applicable and effective in real-world business context.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the value co-creation process as outlined in the updated Service-Dominant (S-D) logic framework (Vargo & Lush, 2016, 5–15):



*Figure 1 S-D Logic Value Co-Creation model (Vargo and Lush 2016)*

As illustrated, value co-creation can be understood as a continuous and dynamic cycle involving multiple interrelated components. The process begins with actors who engage in resource integration and service exchange, activities that are enable and constrained by institutional arrangements such as norms, rules, and shared beliefs. These institutions are themselves generated and reinforced through ongoing interaction, shaping the ecosystem over time. As these components come together, they create layered and connected service ecosystems which can be seen as self-organized networks that support collaboration and promote shared wellbeing.

In the context of this study, this perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation. Rather than viewing branding as a firm-controlled activity, S-D logic suggest that brand value emerges through interaction within networks of actors, including customers, collaborators, and communities. This highlights that brand co-creation in fashion SMEs is not an isolated managerial practice, but part of a broader ecosystem in which meaning and value are continuously negotiated through stakeholder participation. Together, these elements show that value is not create individually, but through connected and organised interactions between actors, shaped by shared rules and systems.

### 2.3.2 SMEs Complementing S-D logic with the value co-creation logic of Prahalad & Ramaswamy

In addition to the S-D logic (Vargo & Lush, 2006) two other influential perspective help to further ground the understanding of value co-creation. One of the earliest and most widely recognized theories is the value co-creation logic introduced by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004, 5–14). While S-D logic emphasizes the systemic, institutional, and ecosystem-based dimensions of value co-creation, Prahalad and Ramaswamy's approach centers more directly on the interactive experiences between companies and consumers. At the heart of their theory lies the idea that value is co-created through active dialogue, transparency, access, and risk-benefit sharing between firms and customers. Rather than viewing consumers as passive recipients of products and services, this approach highlights them as active participants who contribute to shaping the offering. This marks a shift away from traditional, firm-centric models towards more collaborative and experience-driven value creation (Silviera & Simões, 2022, 30–35).

What distinguishes this perspective is its focus on individual empowerment and co-creation through engagement platforms. These platforms, whether digital or physical, allow customers to influence or personalize their experiences with a brand. This stands in contrast to the broader, systemic view of S-D logic, which looks at value co-creation through institutional arrangements and interdependent service ecosystems. However, both theories converge on a critical insight: value is not embedded in goods or services alone but emerges from ongoing interactions among actors (Silviera & Simões, 2022, 33).

By considering both frameworks together, a more comprehensive understanding of value co-creation emerges. Where S-D logic offers a high-level, metatheoretical view grounded in networks, institutions, and collective resource integration, Prahalad and Ramaswamy's theory offers a more consumer-centered lens, drawing attention to the experiential and emotional aspects of co-creation. Importantly, these perspectives are not contradictory but rather complementary. While S-D logic provides the structure for understanding the ecosystemic conditions under which co-creation can occur, the value co-creation logic provides insight into how firms can meaningfully engage individuals within the systems. Taken together, they reveal that successful co-creation requires both institutional alignment and personalized, dialogical engagement (Silviera & Simões, 2022, 33).

### 2.3.3 Complementing S-D logic with the service logic presented by Grönroos

In building a fuller picture of value co-creation, it is also essential to consider the service logic introduced by Grönroos (2011) and further developed by Ravaid (2011). This perspective brings a more interaction-focused view to the conversation, emphasizing that value co-creation happens primarily through direct encounters between firms and customers. These interactions, whether they are face-to-face, online, or voice-based, represent key touchpoints where shared processes can lead to mutual value creation.

Grönroos (2008, 299–306) argues that value co-creation does not take place continuously throughout all customer experiences, but rather in specific, coordinated phases where both the firm and the customer engage in a mutual process. In this view, co-creation occurs only when both parties are actively involved in shaping the experience through dialogue, collaboration, and interaction. Without such direct interactions, the firm's role in the customer's value creation process is limited to being a facilitator rather than an active co-creator. This interpretation contrasts with the broader, systemic perspective of S-D logic, where value co-creation is distributed across networks and coordinated through institutional arrangements. It also differs from Prahalad and Ramaswamy's approach, which emphasizes co-creation through engagement platforms and individual empowerment. Grönroos instead brings the discussion to a more practical level, highlighting that co-creation depends on how firms utilize opportunities for direct interaction with customers (Silveira & Simões, 2022, 35).

An important contribution of service logic is its recognition that co-creation does not automatically lead to positive outcomes. The value generated depends on the quality, relevance and effectiveness of the interaction. For firms, successful co-creation requires the ability to meaningfully influence the customer's experience, while for customers, the interaction may result in either value creation or value destruction. This perspective introduces a more nuanced understanding of co-creation as a conditional and context dependent process. Furthermore, Grönroos distinguishes clearly between co-creation and independent value creation. When direct interaction is absent, customers create value independently supported by the firm's value propositions but without active co-creation. This distinction provides important clarity regarding when co-creation can be said to occur and reinforces the importance of interaction as a necessary condition (Silveira & Simões, 2022, 35).

In the framework of this study, this perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how fashion SMEs engage in collaborative co-creation in practice. It highlights that co-creation is not only

conceptual or ecosystem-level phenomenon but also depends on concrete interaction situations, such as customer dialogue, feedback, and participation in brand-related activities. This makes service logic especially valuable for examining how SMEs translate co-creation into everyday branding practices within the fashion industry.

### 2.3.4 Integrated view of value co-creation: From ecosystems to individual and social participation

Figure 2 brings together the three foundational perspectives of value co-creation discussed above, illustrating how they complement each other to form a layered understanding of how value is co-created in contemporary markets.

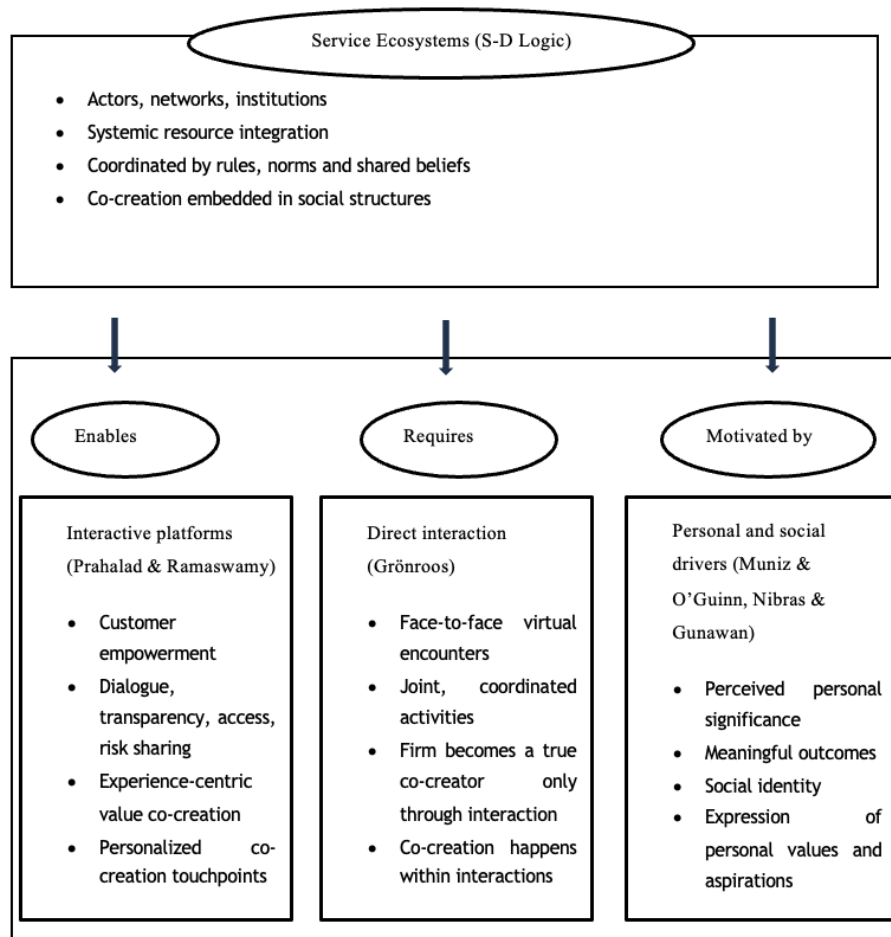


Figure 2 Integrated view of value co-creation

At the broadest level, S-D logic presents value co-creation as an institutional ecosystemic process, coordinated through norms and shared structures across networks of actors. Building on this, Prahalad

and Ramaswamy introduce the idea of customer empowerment through dialogical platforms that enable meaningful experiences. These platforms make value co-creation more individualized and contextual. Grönroos's service logic then narrows the lens, emphasizing that value co-creation occurs only in direct interactions, when both the firm and customer engage in shared process. Finally, customer motivation emerges as a crucial driver. Customers are more likely to co-produce and take in an active role when the outcomes of involvement have a direct impact on their personal lives. Ultimately, they participate in activities they perceive as personally significant. This key insight highlights that for co-creation to occur, customers must view the co-created outcome as having a meaningful effect on their lives.

Together, these perspectives demonstrate that value co-creation operates across multiple levels. It is simultaneously shaped by systemic conditions, individual participation, and direct interaction. Importantly, customer motivation emerges as a central driver of co-creation. Customers are more likely to engage in co-creation when the outcomes are perceived as personally meaningful and relevant to their lives. This highlights that co-creation is not only enabled by firms but also on the willingness and motivation of individuals to participate. In addition to individual participation, co-creation is inherently social. Interactions between customers, as well as between customers and brands, contribute to the development of shared meanings and collective experiences. These interactions often extend beyond individual encounters and form broader social structures, where participation, identity, and belonging play an important role (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, 413–418). This highlights that value co-creation is not only an individual process but also a social and relational phenomenon.

Discovering this integrated perspective is interesting for this study as it offers a useful tool for understanding how collaborative brand do-creation takes place in fashion SMEs. It shows that co-creation is shaped by a combination of ecosystem-level conditions, individual engagement, and direct interaction, all of which influence how brand meaning and value are developed. Importantly, this also leads to the consideration of the specific social contexts in which co-creation occurs. In many cases, these interactions and shared meanings are not random but take place within structured environments where stakeholders engage with both the brand and each other. One such environment is the brand community, which provides a social space for interaction, participation and shared identity. Taking into consideration this perspective, the following section shifts the focus from theoretical foundations of co-creation to the role of brand communities as key contexts in which collaborative brand co-creation can be observed and analyzed, particularly within fashion SMEs.

### 2.3.5 Co-creation through interaction and social-hedonic values within fashion SMEs

Expanding the previously discussed perspectives of value co-creation, recent research highlights the increasingly important role of consumer-brand interaction (CBI) as a foundational mechanism in facilitating co-creation. As emphasized by Nibras and Gunawan (2024), to fully understand brand co-creation, one must first explore how consumers and brands interact. This interaction goes beyond traditional marketing and includes mutual communication during product development or collaborative problem-solving. Rather than acting as passive recipients of brand messaging, consumers are now active contributors, shaping brand development through continuous dialogue.

This perspective closely aligns with the core idea of S-D logic, which views value creation because of interactions within a service ecosystem. In this case, social commerce platform – spaces where consumers and brands interact in real time – act as micro-level ecosystems enabling direct engagement, resource integration, and service-for-service exchange. These platforms offer a space where co-creation can materialize through shared efforts, especially when consumers provide feedback, request guidance, or participate in solving brand-related issues.

The role of the consumer in the creation and development of the brand can also be examined by looking at social-hedonic value (SHV), a concept highlighted by Nibras and Gunawan (2024). SHV centers on the idea that social interactivity lies at the core of social commerce. However, the role of social media, the foundation of social commerce, has evolved from fostering authentic connections to becoming a platform of showcasing life's highlights. As a result, social media now offers experiences that deliver pleasure and enjoyment by enabling individuals to seek social approval, enhance their social status and boost their self-esteem. This shift illustrates that social and hedonic values have become intertwined and can be analyzed as a unified framework. This integrated perspective captures the emotional satisfaction consumers gain from participating in social sharing and shopping activities within social commerce (Jing et al. 2021, 6–10).

Emerging technologies, such as algorithm-driven recommendation systems and AI-supported content curation, further shape these interaction environments by influencing visibility, engagement patterns, and participation in co-creation processes. This highlights that contemporary co-creation is increasingly mediated by digital infrastructures that structure how consumers interact with brands. From the perspectives of fashion SMEs, understanding these interactive and emotionally driven mechanisms of co-creation is particularly important. The core aim of this study – to examine how

fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation – finds practical grounding in the dynamics outlined above. As small and medium-sized enterprises often operate with limited resources and lean marketing structures, creating meaningful, two-way relationships with their customers through platforms like social media presents a cost-effective and impactful way to build brand equity.

While this study does not focus specifically on social media, it is worth highlighting how such platforms can serve as a practical and accessible medium for co-creation in action. For example, Abel Aziz and Saad (2022, 419–425) investigated how fashion SMEs in Egypt utilize Instagram as a space for innovation and collaboration with their customers. Their findings show that feedback and storytelling through social media interactions not only enhance customer engagement but also directly inform product development. Designers reported implementing changes in materials, colors, and product features based on customer input, illustrating how co-creation can emerge through direct dialogue between brand and consumer. This example reinforces the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier. It aligns with Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004, 8–14) emphasis on interactive experiences and shared decision-making, while also reflecting Grönroos's (2008, 300–305) view that co-creation occurs through direct interaction. At the same time, it demonstrates how these processes are embedded within broader ecosystems, as suggested by S-D logic.

Furthermore, the study found that consistent feedback loops and recognition of customer input helped foster loyalty and emotional connection. For instance, customer who saw their suggestions acknowledged in Instagram stories were more likely to continue engaging with the brand. This example illustrates how even resource-constrained fashion SMEs can leverage digital platforms to invite customer participation, create shared value, and co-construct brand meaning. Ultimately, an example like this helps to bridge the gap between high-level theoretical constructs and the actionable practices that SMEs can adopt. They show that value co-creation is not limited to abstract ecosystems but can be fosters in specific, interactive contexts when customers are empowered as active participants. In line with the integrated theoretical foundation presented in this study, Abel Aziz and Saad (2022) case underscores how both institutional conditions (S-D logic), individual engagement (Prahalad & Ramaswamy), and dialogical interaction (Grönroos) must align to enable meaningful co-creation.

Overall, this section demonstrates that value co-creation in fashion SMEs is not only a theoretical construct, but a practical, interaction-based process shaped by digital environments, stakeholder participation, and emotional engagement. This directly supports the research objective of examining

how fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation and highlights the importance of interaction as a central mechanism through which this process unfolds.

## **2.4 Building brand community in fashion SMEs**

### **2.4.1 Defining brand community**

Having established the theoretical basis of co-creation, this section examines how these dynamics materialize in practice through the development of brand communities. In the context of this study, brand communities are considered key environments in which collaborative brand co-creation becomes visible and observable. In fashion SMEs, brand communities often serve as the primary arenas where collaborative value creation unfolds, transforming consumers into active participants in the brand's narrative. This is particularly relevant for addressing the research question of how fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation, as communities provide the setting where such engagement takes place.

A brand community is as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand” (Muniz and O’Gunn, 2001, 412). It is characterized by a shared sense of belonging, commitment, and identity among its members, elements that revolve around, but are not limited to their connection to a brand. Importantly, this type of community exists not in physical proximity, but in the shared experiences and interactions among individuals who engage with the brand and with one another.

Brand communities are often conceptualized as customer-customer-brand triads, where relationships are not only between the brand and its users but also among users themselves (Muniz & O’Gunn, 2001, 412). Extending this view, McAlexander et al., (2002, 358–366) propose a more a customer-centric model where the value and meaning of the community are grounded in the customer's experience rather than being solely tied to the brand entity. While earlier research emphasised structural relationships within communities, more recent perspectives highlight the experiential and interaction-based nature on these relationships, aligning closely with co-creation thinking. This highlights that brand communities thrive through emotional, cognitive, and even material exchange between individuals, which contribute to both personal well-being and collective identity. More broadly communities, whether tied to a neighbourhood, lifestyle, profession or hobby, are defined by shared characteristics and mutual identification and their fundamental role lies in facilitating the exchange of informational, emotional, and tangible resources (McAlexander et al., 2002, 358–366).

The concept of brand community also encompasses several key dimensions that influence its formation and impact, including geographic concentration, social context, and temporality. These dimensions are particularly relevant for this study, as they influence how and where co-creation occurs within fashion SMEs. Different communities may engage with a brand in varying ways depending on their social and structural characteristics, which introduce complexity when examining how co-creation strategies are implemented. Understanding these differences is essential for identifying how brand co-creation can be effectively fostered in practice and how it relates to the challenges and opportunities addressed in the research question.

One academic example that illustrates this clearly is Pihl's (2014, 7–15) study of Swedish fashion bloggers and their audiences. The research explores how bloggers and followers form brand communities around shared values, particularly through style. Instead of simply promoting products, these bloggers build personal narratives around fashion items inviting their audiences to engage, comment, and share their own interpretations. This interaction creates a sense of community that extends beyond individual consumers and includes the brand as a central reference point. Pihl's findings show that such communities can be particularly powerful for small fashion brands, as they rely more heavily on close consumer relationships and value-driven marketing. In this case, the brand becomes part of a larger cultural and social conversation shaped by its users.

Meaningful brand ties and communities can also grow outside the digital environments. Fashion SMEs can benefit from creating physical spaces and interactions that encourage customers to connect with the brand and with each other. A clear example is Alabama Chanin, an artisan-led fashion brand in the United States. The company is based in Florence, Alabama, and focuses on sustainability, traditional craftsmanship, and community involvement. One of the ways Alabama Chanin builds its brand community is by hosting sewing workshops. These events invite customers and local community members into the brand's studio to learn hand-sewing techniques and take part in the creative process. Participants often return multiple times, forming relationships not only with the brand but also with each other. This strengthens the sense of belonging and shared values that are essential to the brand community (Alexander, 2022, 60–68).

In addition, Alabama Chanin combines its production space with a café and store, turning its factory into a social and creative hub. Visitors can see how garments are made, meet the people behind the products, and spend time in an environment that reflects the brand's philosophy. This setup

encourages informal conversations and shared experiences, which play an important role in forming strong community ties. The study by Alexander (2022, 60–68) shows that small brands can use physical spaces not just for selling, but also for creating meaningful experiences. The study highlights how multi-sensory environments, such as those involving touch, smell, and sound, help deepen emotional connections and support customer loyalty. Examples such as Alabama Chanin illustrate how brand communities function as practical environments for co-creation, where customers actively participate in shaping both the product and the brand experience. This reinforces the idea that brand communities are not only social structures but also strategic spaces in which collaborative brand co-creation can be realised in fashion SMEs.

### 2.4.2 Key relationships within brand community

In relation to the third research question – what opportunities arise from implementing brand co-creation strategies in the fashion industry – the insights by McAlexander et al., (2002, 360–366) on the benefits of fostering a brand community are particularly relevant. Their model, shown in Figure 3 below, illustrates the key relationships within a brand community, highlighting the interconnected roles of customers, the brand, and related stakeholders.

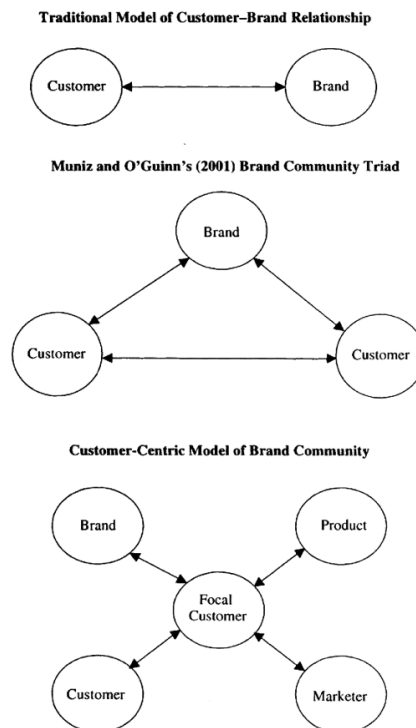


Figure 3 Key Relationships of Brand Community (McAlexander et al. 2002)

McAlexander et al., (2002, 51) found that community integrated customers serve as brand missionaries, carrying the marketing message into other communities. These customers tend to be more forgiving of product or service failures, less likely to switch to competing markets, and more willing to provide feedback to the company. In many cases, they also show strong emotional investment in the success of the brand, which strengthens long-term relationships and contributes to sustained brand equity. These observations highlight that brand communities can create significant value for firms by fostering loyalty, engagement, and advocacy.

This perspective is closely linked to the concept of brand loyalty, which refers to a strong and enduring commitment to repeatedly purchase or engage with a preferred brand over time (Richard, 1990). Research has shown that brand loyalty contributes to increased profitability, reduced sensitivity to competitors' marketing efforts, and stronger barriers to market entry. Similarly, Ganesan (1994, 3–10) emphasizes that trust plays a central role in maintaining long-term relationships, as it develops through repeated interactions and consistent contentment. While satisfaction can be formed relatively quickly, trust requires longer-term engagement and is more influential in determining customer commitment (Achrol, 1991, 79–86). These insights suggest that the relationships formed within brand communities are not only social but also economically significant. From the perspective of this research, these relationship dynamics are particularly important for understanding both the opportunities and challenges of collaborative brand co-creation in fashion SMEs. While strong community ties enhance loyalty and engagement, building and maintaining such relationships requires continuous interaction, trust building, and alignment with customer expectations.

Building on these relationship dynamics, the development of brand communities in fashion SMEs can be understood as a strategic extension of trust, loyalty, and long-term customer engagement. As recent studies highlight, brand-oriented leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing organizational brand equity, which is vital for SMEs aiming to cultivate strong and enduring brand communities. In the fashion industry, the presence of brand community has been shown to significantly strengthen both brand equity and customer loyalty. These factors are essential for survival in a highly competitive market, and therefore important considerations for this study. Importantly, these external outcomes are closely linked to internal organizational practices. Brand-oriented leadership has been found to positively influence brand equity by enabling effective internal brand management and communication strategies, which in turn enhance employee commitment and engagement (Zhang, 2022). This internal alignment supports the consistent delivery of brand values, reinforcing the trust and satisfaction discussed previously.

Moreover, building on the importance of trust, engagement, and internal alignment discussed previously, the integration of digital marketing strategies has become a pivotal enabler for fostering relationships and developing brand communities in SMEs. The rise of the internet and social media has fundamentally transformed how brands and consumers interact, increasing both frequency and intensity of online engagement while at the same time intensifying competition (Kumar, 2020, 988–996). Recent research further emphasises that digital brand communities play a central role in shaping customer engagement and co-creation processes in contemporary markets (Le et al., 2022, 1042–1049).

This has resulted in brands increasingly leveraging their social media platforms to engage with consumers and establish a sustainable competitive advantage. Simultaneously, social media has allowed consumers to form communities based on shared interests and passions, thereby strengthening interpersonal connections. In this context, brand communities (BCs) can be understood as virtual platforms where individuals with a share interest in a brand actively participate in creating and sharing content, exchanging knowledge and developing connections with both the brand and other consumers (Cova & Pace, 2006, 1090; Santos et al., 2022, 4–12). These interactions reinforce the relational dynamics of trust and satisfaction highlighted earlier, further strengthening customer-brand relationships.

Expanding on this, Kiran et al. (2023) introduce the concept of social media brand communities (SMBCs), emphasizing their role as interactive environments in which consumer engagement directly contributes to key branding outcomes within the fashion industry. Their findings indicate a shift in how brands develop, communicate, and disseminate content, highlighting the need for continuous adaptation to evolving consumer expectations (Loureiro et al., 2019, 370–372). From a managerial perspective, this suggests that building a brand community is not a static process, but one that relies on ongoing interaction, responsiveness and strategic alignment. This is supported by recent literature on customer brand co-creation which highlights the role of interactive digital platforms in enabling participation, dialogue, and value creation between firms and consumers (Le et al., 2022).

Importantly, recent studies further highlight those digital technologies such as algorithm-driven content, personalised recommendations, and emerging AI based tools, are increasingly shaping how consumers engage with brands and communities. These technologies influence which content is visible, how interactions are structured and how relationships evolve over time, thereby playing a

growing role in facilitating or constraining co-creation processes. Consequently, engagement within brand communities is not only driven by consumer motivation but also mediated by platform dynamics and technological infrastructures. From the perspective of fashion SMEs, these developments present both opportunities and challenges. On the other hand, digital platforms provide accessible and cost-effective means to engage with customers, build communities and foster co-creation. On the other hand, they require continuous adaptation to rapidly evolving technologies and shifting consumer expectations.

In this context, Kiran et al (2023, 2950) demonstrate that SMBCs significantly influence brand experience (BE), brand image (BI) and brand trust (BT) and ultimately brand loyalty (BL). Especially brand trust emerges as central mechanism, defined by consumers' willingness to rely on a brand to fulfil its promises and deliver consistent value. This reinforces earlier findings that trust develops over time through consistent and meaningful interactions. When brands successfully deliver value and engage authentically with their communities, they strengthen trust, which in turn fosters long-term customer loyalty. Furthermore, successful co-creation within brand communities depends not only on participation levels, but also on the quality of interactions and the perceived authenticity of the brand. When consumers feel that their contributions are recognised and valued, they are more likely to engage actively and develop stronger emotional connections.

From a practical perspective, social media brand communities offer significant opportunities for value co-creation. Consumers are motivated to participate due to their passion for the brand, the desire to connect with like-minded individuals, access information, express themselves, and obtain rewards (Balduş, 2018, 120–129). Additionally, firms can leverage influential community members as opinion leaders, encouraging positive word-of-mouth and enhancing brand awareness (Shekhar Kumar et al., 2013). In this way, social media and experiential marketing function together to create meaningful interactions and deepen consumer-brand relationships. In the light of this research, these insights underline that brand communities are not merely supportive structures, but central mechanisms through which fashion SMEs can implement collaborative brand co-creation strategies. Recent research supports this view, suggesting that co-creation is increasingly embedded in digital and community-driven branding practices, particularly in SME contexts (Juntunen, 2025, 270–277). At the same time, these strategies highlight that managing brand communities requires balancing strategic intent with authentic engagement, a tension that directly relates to both the opportunities and challenges addressed in the research questions.

### 2.4.3 Comparing brand communities and collaborative brand building in fashion SMEs

While brand communities and collaborative brand building are closely interconnected, they represent distinct yet complementary mechanisms of value creation within contemporary branding literature. A brand community primarily refers to a social structure formed around shared meanings, practices and emotional attachments to a brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, 412–418; McAlexander et al., 2002, 359–365). These communities are characterized by a sense of belonging, shared identity and ongoing interaction among members, where value emerges through social exchange and collective meaning-making. In contrast, collaborative brand building reflects a more strategic and managerial perspective, where firms intentionally involve stakeholders, such as customers, partners, and communities, in shaping brand identity value propositions and market offerings (Ind et al., 2013, 9–14; Markovic et al., 2022, 533–555). From this perspective, co-creation is not only an emergent social phenomenon but also a deliberate process that can be guided and facilitated by the firms. This distinction illustrates a fundamental difference orientation. While brand communities are primarily socially driven, collaborative brand building is strategically coordinated.

However, recent research suggests that this distinction has become increasingly blurred. As Sarasvuo et al. (2022, 548–555) argue, co-creation in branding is best understood as a dynamic process in which multiple actors continuously negotiate and construct brand meaning. Similarly, Le et al. (2022) argue, co-creation in branding is best understood as a dynamic process in which multiple actors continuously negotiate and construct brand meaning. Similarly, Le et al. (2022, 1044) highlight that digital platforms have transformed branding into a participatory process, where consumers actively contribute to brand narratives, rather than merely consuming them. These perspectives propose that brand communities and collaborative brand building should not be viewed as separate phenomena, but rather as interdependent processes that jointly shape brand value.

In the context of fashion SMEs, this interplay is particularly significant. Due to their smaller scale, limited resources, and often founder-driven identity, SMEs rely heavily on close and authentic relationships with their customers. As a result, their brand communities frequently evolve into co-creative environments, where consumers actively participate in shaping the brand through feedback, content creation, and shared experiences. This aligns with recent research by Juntunen (2025, 266–273), which emphasises that SME brand co-creation is inherently relational and depends on continuous interaction between firms and stakeholders. At the same time, collaborative brand building provides strategic structure through which firms can guide and leverage these interactions.

While communities often emerge organically, SMEs can actively affect and facilitate co-creation processes through specific practices, such as engaging customers in product development, encouraging user-generated content, or creating participatory brand experiences. This highlights that effective co-creation requires a balance between emergent community dynamics and intentional managerial direction.

From the viewpoint of this research, this balance introduces a central tension within collaborative branding. On one hand, co-creation relies on authenticity, openness, and genuine participation. On the other hand, firms must maintain a degree of strategic control to ensure consistency in brand identity and positioning. As Ind et al. (2013, 9–14) suggest, successful co-creation depends on the firm's ability to enable participation without over-controlling it, allowing stakeholders to contribute meaningfully while preserving coherence of the brand. Recent technological developments have a great influence on this relationship as digital platforms, algorithm-driven content distribution and emerging AI-based tools increasingly shape how brand communities form, interact and evolve. These technologies influence which content gains visibility, how interactions are structured and how brands collaborate with their audiences. As a result, co-creation processes are no longer solely driven by human interaction but are also guided by technological infrastructures that can both enable and constrain participation (Le et al., 2022, 1040–1048). For fashion SMEs this creates both opportunities for scalable engagement and challenges related to maintaining authenticity in increasingly mediated environments.

In this study, understanding the relationship between brand communities and collaborative brand building is essential for analysing how fashion SMEs engage in brand co-creation. Brand communities can be understood as the social foundation that enables interaction, participation and shared meaning-making, while collaborative brand building refers to ways companies guide and make use of these interactions. Together these perspectives propose that successful brand co-creation in fashion SMEs depends on the alignment between community-driven dynamics and managerial intent. When these elements support each other, SMEs can create meaningful, participatory brand experiences that enhance innovation, strengthen customer relationships, and build long-term brand equity. However, when these elements are not aligned, tensions can emerge between authenticity and control, highlighting the broader challenges of putting co-creation strategies into practice.

## 2.5 Synthesis

The concept of brand co-creation has evolved significantly over the last few decades, with various theoretical perspectives contributing to its current understanding. In the context of the fashion industry, brand co-creation plays a critical role in enhancing customer loyalty and creating meaningful brand experiences. Several foundational theories and emerging concepts provide a framework for understanding how brand co-creation can be implemented and how it influences brand loyalty, customer relationships, and brand community development.

Branding has long been recognized as a fundamental element of marketing, though it was only in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that it gained significant academic attention. The role of branding is central to creating identity, reputation, and differentiation in the marketplace. According to Wilson and Levy (2012, 350–357), branding encompasses not just a symbol or logo but also the underlying human desire for both social belonging and individuality. This dual aspect of branding helps shape consumer perceptions and actions, encouraging them to identify with and differentiate themselves through specific brands. In the contemporary globalized market, where products often appear similar, a strong brand identity allows businesses to stand out and build consumer trust, credibility, and loyalty (Tarannum et al., 2024, 657–660).

The theory of value co-creation, as outlined in service-dominant (S-D) logic by Vargo and Lush (2004, 1–11), emphasizes the shift from a firm-centred to a customer-centred approach. According to this logic, value is not inherently embedded in the product but is created through interactions between the business and the consumer. Consumers are seen as active participants in creating value, not passive recipients. This shift to a co-creation model is further supported by service logic (Grönroos, 2008), which argues that the creation of value occurs through continuous engagement and resource integration between customers and businesses. In the fashion industry, this perspective is particularly relevant as customers often engage in the creation of brand meaning through interactions, feedback, and experiences with the brand (Da Silveira & Simões, 2022, 30–37). Through social media and other platforms, consumers can influence product development, share feedback, and build deeper connections with brands.

Recent developments in social commerce have introduced a new dimension to brand co-creation. Social commerce allows consumers to directly interact with brands and contribute to product development through feedback and ratings, often enhancing the hedonic and social value of the brand.

The integration of social media into the brand experience allows consumers to seek social approval, express their identities, and gain social recognition. As these platforms evolve, they have become central to the co-creation process, enabling brands to engage consumers in real-time, fostering emotional connections, and promoting customer participation (Nibras & Gunawan, 2024).

A crucial aspect of brand co-creation is the development of brand communities, which play an essential role in building brand loyalty and enhancing customer relationships. Brand communities are defined as specialized, non-geographically bound communities where members share a common interest in a particular brand (Muniz & O’Gunn, 2001, 412–420). These communities foster a sense of belonging and facilitate the exchange of resources, whether cognitive, emotional, or material (McAlexander et al., 2002). As McAlexander et al., (2002, 360–366) suggest, customers who are deeply integrated into brand communities act as “brand missionaries” promoting the brand to others, forgiving product failures, and enhancing brand equity.

Brand communities are particularly important for SMEs in the fashion industry, where creating strong emotional ties and a loyal customer base is essential for differentiation in a highly competitive market. These communities not only support customer loyalty but also enhance a firm’s ability to innovate and adapt through continuous feedback (Kiran et al., 2023). As consumers become active participants in brand creation, they develop deeper relational ties, increasing their likelihood of long-term engagement and loyalty (Ganesan, 1994, 4–10). Trust plays a central role in this process, as it develops through consistent interactions, positive experiences, and the fulfilment of brand promises (William & Hazer, 1986, 221–226). Together, these elements reinforce customer satisfaction and contribute to sustained brand loyalty.

The rapid growth of social media platforms has further reshaped how brands engage with consumers. Social media brand communities (SMBCs) have become pivotal in connecting consumers with brands, facilitating co-creation, and strengthening brand loyalty (Kiran et al., 2023). Through real-time communication and interactive experiences, these platforms allow brands to align more closely with evolving consumer expectations. As consumers increasingly seek connection and self-expression in digital environments, building and maintaining such communities has become a critical strategy for long-term brand success in the fashion industry (Cova & Pace, 2006, 1090–1098).

The literature demonstrates that branding in the fashion SME context cannot be understood through traditional one-way communication models. Instead, it unfolds within a network of relationships in

which firms and consumers jointly construct brand meaning. This perspective provides the analytical lens for examining the case studies of Cuitu and AIDA Impact later in this thesis. By applying insights from co-creation theory, service logic, and brand community research, the empirical analysis explores how these firms operationalise collaborative brand building in practice, following established case study approaches (Yin, 2003, 1–26; Rowley, 2002. 16–25).

### **Conceptual framework of brand co-creation in the fashion industry:**

The conceptual framework of this study synthesises insights from Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lush), Prahalad and Ramaswamy's co-creation logic, and Grönroos's service logic to illustrate how brand value is co-created within fashion SMEs. Rather than presenting co-creation as a linear process, the framework conceptualises it as a set of interconnected mechanisms through which firms and consumers jointly shape brand meaning and identity.

As its foundation, branding establishes identity, differentiation, and credibility, providing the platform upon which collaborative processes can emerge. Building on this, collaborative brand building emphasises multi-actor participation and stakeholder engagement, enabling SMEs to integrate diverse resources and perspectives into their brand strategies. Value co-creation, as conceptualised in service-dominant logic, highlights how value emerges through interaction and resource integration among multiple actors within shared institutional contexts. Prahalad and Ramaswamy's co-creation logic complements this perspective by focusing on experiential and relational dimensions, such as dialogue, transparency, and shared risk-benefit structures, which together foster participatory engagement. Grönroos's service logic further refines this understanding by emphasising that value is realised in direct interactions between firms and customers, where the quality of engagement becomes central.

Through these interconnected mechanisms, co-creation in fashion SMEs generates social and hedonic value, enabling consumers to express identity and gain emotional satisfaction. Sustained engagement of this kind supports the formation of brand communities, where shared meanings and values strengthen loyalty and advocacy. These communities, in turn, reinforce collaborative brand building by contributing feedback, ideas and word-of-mouth promotion.

Ultimately, the framework demonstrates that co-creation in fashion SMEs function as a continuous, reciprocal process that connects theoretical principles with practical outcomes. By integrating

branding foundations, collaborative engagement, and community participation, SMEs can enhance brand equity, strengthen customer relationships, and support innovation and through that achieve long-term differentiation in a dynamic market environment.

The conceptual framework presented in Table 1 synthesises the key theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter into a structured representation of brand co-creation in fashion SMEs. Instead of presenting separate elements, the framework describes a continuous and interconnected process in which each component builds upon the one before it. It begins with branding foundations, which establish the identity and positioning of the firm, and progresses through collaborative brand building value co-creation processes, where multiple actors interact and integrate resources.

These processes are further shaped by experiential, relational, and interaction-based dimensions, which contribute to the formation of brand communities. The framework ultimately highlights key outcomes, including customer loyalty, brand equity and innovation. In this research, this framework serves as an analytical lens for examining how fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation in practice. It guides the empirical analysis by identifying the key mechanisms and relationships explored in the case studies.

*Table 1 Conceptual framework of brand co-creation in the fashion industry*

<b>Key components of the co-creation process</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Implications for the fashion industry (SMEs)</b>
<b>Branding foundations</b>	Branding establishes the core identity, values, and differentiation of the firm. It provides the foundational platform upon which collaborative processes can emerge.	A coherent brand identity enables SMEs to communicate authenticity and heritage, which are essential for differentiation in a saturated and fast-moving fashion market.
<b>Collaborative brand building</b>	Building on this foundation, firms engage multiple actors such as consumers, partners, employees, and communities, in shaping brand's identity and value proposition.	Collaboration expands creative capacity, allowing fashion SMEs to co-develop products, content, and storytelling aligned with consumer values and trends.
<b>Value co-creation (S-D Logic)</b>	Values emerge through interactions among ecosystem actors who integrate resources and share knowledge under institutional arrangements.	Fashion SMEs co-create value by engaging customers as contributors in design feedback, sustainable material selection, and brand storytelling.
<b>Co-creation logic (Prahalad &amp; Ramaswamy)</b>	Co-creation is enabled through dialogue, transparency, access, and risk benefit sharing between the company and consumers.	Interactive experiences on digital platforms build engagement and emotional attachment while increasing consumer's sense of ownership in the brand.
<b>Service logic (Grönroos)</b>	Value is realised in direct interactions between firms and customers, where mutual experiences are created and evaluated.	For SMEs, personal interaction, whether it is online or face-to-face, translates to emotional connection, stronger loyalty, and perceived brand authenticity.
<b>Social and hedonic drivers</b>	Consumers gain pleasure, identity expression, and social approval through brand participation.	Fashion SMEs can use social commerce and sensory experiences to transform shopping into identity-affirming social activity.
<b>Brand community formation</b>	Consumers form communities around shared meanings, values, and rituals that strengthen collective brand identity.	Building online and offline communities supports advocacy, content creation, and long-term loyalty.
<b>Outcomes: loyalty, equity and innovation</b>	Sustained co-creation fosters emotional attachment, trust, and continuous brand evolution.	Co-created communities improve customer retention, stimulate innovation through feedback, and strengthen competitive positioning.

As shown in the Table 1, brand co-creation in fashion SMEs emerges as a dynamic and reciprocal process in which strategic, social, and experiential elements interact. The framework highlights that successful co-creation depends on the alignment of these components rather than their isolated implementation, reinforcing the importance of an integrated approach to collaborative brand building.

### **3 Research design**

#### **3.1 Research approach**

This chapter outlines the methodological choices made to address the research questions of the study. It explains the overall research design, discussing the selected research approach, and presents the rationale for the methodological decisions. The aim of the research design is to ensure a coherent link between the theoretical framework introduced earlier and the empirical implementation of the study. The structure of this chapter follows the logic of a qualitative case study research, beginning with the discussion of the research approach, followed by the criteria for case selection, and continuing with the methods of data collection and analysis.

The selection of research approach depends on the nature of the phenomenon under investigation and the type of understanding the researcher aims to achieve. In this study, a qualitative research approach was chosen because the objective is to gain an in-depth understanding of how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the fashion industry engage in collaborative brand co-creation. Qualitative research is particularly suitable when the research seeks to explore complex, process-oriented, and context-dependent phenomena that cannot be meaningfully reduced to numerical data (Creswell 2007, 39–40; Ghauri & Grønhaug 2010, 105). It enables the researcher to capture the experiences, interpretations, and actions of individuals and organisations, and to analyse how meanings are socially constructed in specific settings.

From a philosophical standpoint, this study adopts an interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist ontology, where reality is understood as socially constructed through human interaction and shared meaning-making (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 14–15). The interpretivist stance implies that knowledge is produced through understanding how actors perceive and interpret their environment rather than through measuring objective reality. This view aligns with the theoretical foundations of brand co-creation, which emphasises dialogue, participation, and mutual value creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004; Vargo & Lusch 2004). The interpretivist approach thus allows the researcher to explore how fashion entrepreneurs, designers, and other stakeholders make sense of co-creation practices and how these interpretations shape brand identity and value.

In qualitative inquiry, the role of the researcher is both interpretive and reflexive. As Creswell (2009, 175) notes, the researcher becomes the primary instrument for data collection and analysis,

interpreting patterns and meanings as they emerge from the data. This requires sensitivity to the research context and openness to adjusting interpretations as new insights develop. Qualitative research is also characterised by methodological flexibility, meaning that research questions, interview protocols, and theoretical assumptions may evolve throughout the study as understanding deepens (Hirsijörvi, Remes & Sajavaara, 1996, 165). This flexibility was particularly important in this study, as the empirical exploration of co-creation in fashion SMEs required iterative engagement with both theory and data.

Given the exploratory and contextual nature of this research, qualitative case study strategy was adopted. Case studies especially suitable for examining contemporary phenomena within their real-life context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clear (Yin 2003, 1–8). They allow for the use of multiple sources of evidence such as interviews, company documents, and visual material, enabling data triangulation and increasing the credibility of the findings (Yin 2003, 97). Moreover, the case study approach provides the depth and richness necessary for understanding organisational practices that are socially and contextually embedded. It is particularly valuable when the researcher has no control over behavioural events and seeks to answer “how” and “why” questions (Rowley 2002, 17–18).

This study employs a multiple-case design, focusing on two Finnish fashion SMEs that represent relevant examples of collaborative brand building. Multiple case studies follow a replication logic, where each case is treated as an independent study contributing to overall cross-case analysis (Yin 1994; Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, 27). This approach increases the robustness of results and enables the identification of both commonalities and contextual differences across cases. The cases selected for this study, Cuitu and AIDA Impact, represent two distinctive but complementary manifestations of co-creation in fashion: one grounded in sustainable and circular design, and the other in social entrepreneurship and community inclusion. Analysing these cases comparatively provides valuable insights into the mechanisms through which SMEs co-create brand value under different strategic and cultural conditions.

Furthermore, the purpose of this study is theory-extending, meaning that it seeks to enrich and contextualise existing theoretical perspectives rather than build new theory from scratch. According to Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, 25–27), case-based qualitative research is well suited for such theory extension, as it combines empirical exploration with conceptual refinement. The findings of this research aim to elaborate on existing frameworks of brand co-creation by illustrating how the

manifest in the context of small fashion enterprises. This approach integrates both inductive and deductive reasoning: existing theories guide the research design and data interpretation, while the empirical findings contribute to refining and extending theoretical understanding.

In summary, the qualitative and interpretive multiple-case study approach provides a coherent and precise foundation for exploring the main research question, how do fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation? This approach makes it possible to examine the lived experiences of practitioners, the relational dynamics within co-creation processes, and the contextual factors that shape brand development in the fashion industry. The following explains the rationale and criteria for the selection of the cases and outlines how this methodological design is implemented in practice.

## **3.2 Selection of cases**

### **3.2.1 Case selection process**

The selection of cases is a critical stage in qualitative research design, as it determines the empirical foundation through which theoretical insights are developed and refined. In case-based studies, the goal is not to achieve representativeness in a statistical sense, but rather to identify information-rich cases that allow for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Stake 1995, 4; Feltcher & Plakoyikannaki, 2011, 171). The emphasis is therefore on theoretical and contextual relevance rather than numerical generalisation. Fletcher and Plakoyiannaki (2011, 171–178) argue that a key strength of case study research lies in its ability to link empirical observations with conceptual reasoning through carefully selected cases that exemplify meaningful variations of the studied phenomenon.

In this study, the case selection process followed a purposeful and informed logic, guided by the research aim of exploring how small and medium-sized enterprises in the Finnish fashion industry engage in brand co-creation. The intention was to select cases that would provide both conceptual depth and contextual insight, enabling the examination of brand co-creation as a socially embedded, practice-oriented process. This logic aligns with the interpretivist and constructivists epistemological stance of the study, which views knowledge as contextually situated and co-constructs through social interaction (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 14–15). Consequently, the cases were not chosen to represent a population, but to illuminate how the dynamics of collaborative brand creation are manifested in different organisational and strategic contexts.

Following Yin's (2003, 47–50) rationale for multiple-case design, the study employs a replication logic, where each case is treated as an independent yet complementary unit of analysis. Multiple-case studies enable the researcher to compare patterns across cases, strengthening the validity of theoretical interpretations through the identification of recurring mechanisms as well as contextual divergences (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, 27). The two selected companies – Cuitu and AIDA Impact – represent distinct but comparable instances of fashion-sector SMEs engaged in collaborative brand development. Both operate within the Finnish design industry, share similar scale and creative orientation, yet differ in their strategic focus and underlying value systems. This contrast provides the analytical variety necessary for identifying how co-creation practices emerge and evolve under different organisational conditions.

Cuitu represents a sustainability driven approach to co-creation, where brand identity is shaped through material innovation, circular design, and partnerships with other creative actors. Its commitment to full transparency and use of upcycled materials illustrates how co-creation extends beyond marketing discourse into product development and value-chain collaboration. AIDA Impact, in contrast, embodies a socially oriented model of co-creation, integrating inclusion and community engagement into its brand identity and business model. The company's focus on ethical production and the empowerment of immigrant women situates it at the intersection of entrepreneurship and social responsibility. Together, these cases offer a multidimensional view of brand co-creation, highlighting its strategic, cultural, and ethical dimensions.

The choice of these two companies was also influenced by practical and epistemic considerations related to access and data richness. As Fletcher and Plakoyiannaki (2011, 176–178) note, the researcher's ability to gain proximity to the field and engage reflexively with participants is central to the credibility of qualitative case research. Both Cuitu and AIDA Impact offered access to key decision-makers and publicly available materials, allowing for comprehensive data collection and triangulation. The size and structure of these companies further facilitated close engagement with the founders and creative leaders, enabling insights into their decision-making processes, brand philosophy, and collaborative practices. This level of access is particularly valuable in interpretive research, where meaning is co-produced through dialogue and contextual immersion (Creswell 2007, 39–40).

While both case companies are in Finland, the purpose of this study is not to provide a nationally bounded analysis but to generate insights that contribute to broader discussions in international

business and management research. The Finnish fashion industry offers a relevant and dynamic empirical context through which global phenomena, such as sustainability-driven entrepreneurship, ethical production, and participatory branding, can be examined in practice. Cuitu and AIDA Impact therefore serve as theoretically informed exemplars that illustrate how small creative enterprises in a globally connected industry interpret and implement co-creation within their respective strategic and cultural settings. The findings derived from these cases are not intended to describe national characteristics of Finnish fashion SMEs but to contribute to analytical generalisation, enriching theoretical perspective on brand co-creation and extending their applicability to other contexts within the international business landscape (Yin 2003, 32; Fletche & Plakoyiannaki 2011, 171–180).

Although this study ultimately focuses on Cuitu and AIDA Impact, the research design initially considered including a third case, the Finnish fashion brand VAIN. Founded by creative director Jimi Vain and CEO Roope Reinola, VAIN represents a new generation of digitally native fashion enterprises that merge creative expression, social media virality, and community-building into a coherent brand identity. The brand's international collaborations and visibility on platforms such as Pitti Uomo and New York Fashion Week, as well as its globally recognised partnership with McDonald's position it at the intersection of art, culture and commerce. Conceptually, VAIN would have provided an illumination counterpoint to Cuitu's sustainability-driven and AIDA Impact's socially embedded approaches, offering insights into how digital creativity and cultural symbolism contribute to brand co-creation in an increasingly interconnected fashion industry. However, despite the conceptual relevance, the company's limited availability during the research periods, owing to the development of new collections, made in-depth data collection unfeasible.

Reflecting on this initial design choice highlights the importance of timing and access in qualitative case research (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki 2011, 171–180). While VAIN was excluded from the empirical phase, its consideration nevertheless reinforces the theoretical logic underlying the case selection process. The brand embodies many of the dynamics central to contemporary fashion entrepreneurship – cross-industry collaboration, online community engagement, and value creation through storytelling and aesthetics – that from the broader context of this study. Including this reflection therefore acknowledges the iterative and situational nature of qualitative research design, where both theoretical ambition and practical feasibility shape the eventual scope of empirical investigation.

In summary, the final selection of Cuitu and AIDA Impact reflects a deliberate methodological decision grounded in theoretical relevance, contextual richness, and empirical accessibility. Together, these two cases provide a coherent yet diverse foundation for examining how small and medium-sized fashion enterprises engage in collaborative brand creation within globally connected markets. Their shared characteristics as value-driven creative firms, combined with their differing emphases on sustainability and social impact, enable a multifaceted exploration of co-creation as both strategic and cultural process. Although VAIN could not be included in the empirical phase, its conceptual consideration further strengthens the methodological transparency of this study, demonstrating how qualitative research design evolves through an iterative negotiation between theoretical ambition and practical feasibility. Through the analysis of these two selected cases, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how SMEs interpret, enact, and sustain co-creative branding practices in the international business environment.

### 3.2.2 Case Cuitu

Cuitu Oy is a Finnish accessory company headquartered in Turku, Finland. The company was established in 2019 and is led by co-founder Evi Oivanen (CEO) and Anna Kytövuori (Chair of the Board). The firm operates within the fashion and accessories industry, with a focus on sustainable production practices. Key company and financial information are summarised in Table 2. In 2024, Cuitu reported a revenue of €16,000, representing a decrease compared to the previous year. Despite its small size, the company demonstrates relatively strong profitability, with an operating margin of approximately 38,9%. The equity ratio of approximately 35% indicates moderate financial stability for an SME operating in a competitive market.

*Table 2 Key financial and company information of Cuitu Oy*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Information</b>
Company name	Cuitu Oy
Location	Turku, Finland
Founded	Summer 2019
Key personnel	CEO: Evi Oivanen; Chair: Anna Kytövuori
Employees	Founder-led
Industry	Accessories/fashion
Business model	Upcycles accessories, circular fashion
Revenue (2024)	€16,000
Revenue change	-20% compared to previous year
Operating profit	€7,000
Operating margin	38,9%
Net profit	€5,000
Equity ratio	35%
Sources	Asiakastieto (2025); Finder (n.d.); company websites

Cuitu's business model is based on the use of pre-existing materials, such as surplus fabrics and deadstock, which are sourced from partner companies. All products are manufactured locally in Finland. The company therefore operates within the broader context of circular fashion and sustainable design practices (Cuitu Official Website 2026). The company was founded by Evi Oivanen, Anna Kytövuori and Vilma Piironen, and its initial product development was based on upcycling surplus materials (Turun Sanomat 2024) Since its establishment, Cuitu has engaged in collaborations with external partners, including textile companies and technology providers, which are relevant for examining collaborative practices within the firm (LinkedIn Cuitu 2026).

Cuitu was selected as a case for this study due to its explicit focus on sustainability, its reliance on partnerships, and its engagement with collaborative practices that align with the concept of brand co-creation. As a small, founder-led fashion enterprise, the company provide a relevant empirical context for exploring how collaborative brand-building processes are implemented in practice.

### 3.2.3 Case AIDA Impact

AIDA Group Oy is a Finnish jewellery company headquartered in Helsinki, operating under the industry code for precious-metal jewellery manufacturing (Asiakastieto, 2025). The company is best known through its consumer brand AIDA Impact, which combines minimalist design aesthetics with a strong social mission. The enterprise was founded in 2017 by designer and entrepreneur Elina Siira, whose vision was to merge timeless craftsmanship with social responsibility in a way that redefines the meaning of jewellery in contemporary culture.

*Table 3 Key financial and company information of AIDA Impact*

Category	Information
Company name	AIDA Group Oy (AIDA Impact)
Location	Helsinki, Finland
Founded	Spring 2017
Key personnel	Founder: Elina Siira
Employees	5 employees
Industry	Jewellery/design
Business model	Handmade jewellery, social entrepreneurship
Revenue (2024)	€310,000
Revenue change	+58%
Operating profit	€24,000
Operating margin	7%
Net profit	€5,000
Equity ratio	42%
Sources	Asiakastieto (2025); Finder (n.d.); Company websites

As illustrated in Table 3, in 2024 AIDA Group Oy reported a turnover of approximately €310,00, representing significant growth compared to the previous year. The company recorded an operating profit of approximately €24,000 and maintained an equity ratio of around 42%, indicating a relatively stable financial position for a firm of its size (Asiakastieto 2025). The company employs approximately five people, reflecting a small-scale, craft-oriented organisational structure (Finder n.d.).

AIDA Impact's business model is based on the production of handcrafted jewellery using high quality natural and recycled materials. Production takes place in Helsinki, and the company collaborates with community partners to employ immigrant women, integrating social impact directly into its operations (AIDA Impact Official Website 2026). The company was selected as a case for this study due to its strong emphasis on social entrepreneurship, its integration of community-based production practices and its relevance for examining collaborative brand co-creation within fashion SME context.

### 3.3 Data collection

The empirical material for this study was collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews supported by secondary documentary data, including company websites, press materials, social media communications, podcast appearances and other publicly available brand-related content. As the purpose of the research is to understand how small and medium-sized enterprises in the fashion industry engage in collaborative brand co-creation, interviews were chosen as the primary method because of their ability to capture participants' experiences, interpretations, and reflections in depth. Qualitative interviewing allows the researcher to examine the meanings that actors attach to their practices and contexts, providing a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under study (Cresswell 2007, 38–40; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 78). In line with the interpretivist approach adopted in this research, knowledge is viewed as co-created between the researcher and participants through dialogue, rather than discovered as an objective truth. This makes the interview not only a means of obtaining information but also a process of meaning-making in which both parties actively construct understanding (Yin 2003, 83–85).

Semi-structured interviews were considered the most appropriate data collection technique, as they provide a flexible yet systematic way of gathering information. Following a predetermined set of themes, the interviewer was able to adapt the discussion according to the flow of conversation, allowing participants to elaborate freely on the issues most relevant to them (Hirsijärvi & Hurme 2008, 47–48; Daniels & Cannice 2004, 192). This approach was particularly valuable for exploring co-creation within the context of fashion SMEs, since the topic involves relational and context-specific dynamics that require participant's own interpretations to be voiced in detail. The open-ended nature of the questions encouraged reflection on experiences, motivations, and collaborative practices, helping to reveal the processes through which value and brand meaning are constructed.

The two interviews were conducted individually with the founders and key decision-makers of the selected case companies, Cuitu and AIDA Impact. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling, which is consistent with the logic of qualitative case study research (Stake 1995, 3–5; Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, 26–28). Both interviewees possess direct and strategic involvement in brand-related decision-making and co-creation activities within their organisations, making them highly suitable for providing first-hand insights into the phenomenon. The interview with Cuitu's co-founder and owner, Anna Kytövuori, was conducted on 4 July 2025 and lasted approximately 43 minutes, while the interview with AIDA Impact's founder and creative director, Elina Siira, was

conducted on 21 October 2025 and lasted 35 minutes. The interview with Cuitu was carried out via online video call, whereas the interview with AIDA Impact was conducted through recorded voice messages due to scheduling constraints and the interviewee's preferred communication format.

The interview with Cuitu was conducted via Zoom, which created a natural and interactive environment that allowed the questions to be adapted flexibly during the discussions and enabled spontaneous follow-up questions. This format supported in-depth reflection and fostered an engaging connection with the interviewee. In contrast, the interview with AIDA Impact was conducted asynchronously through WhatsApp voice messages. While this format limited opportunities for immediate clarification and probing, it nevertheless enabled the interviewee to provide reflective responses at her own pace. Each response was recorded separately in relation to a specific question, which improved the clarity and organisation of the material.

*Table 4 Conducted interviews*

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Position in the organisation</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Date</b>
Cuitu Oy	Anna Kytövuori	Co-founder and owner	43 min	4 July 2025
AIDA Impact	Elina Siira	Founder and creative director	35 min	21 October 2025

Although both cases are rooted in the Finnish fashion industry, they represent distinct perspectives within the broader field of sustainable and ethical business. Cuitu is a design-driven company that emphasises material innovation, circularity, and transparency, whereas AIDA Impact operates with a strong social mission, employing disadvantaged women and promoting socially responsible production. The founders' reflections therefore offered complementary insights into how co-creation manifests in organisations that integrate sustainability and creativity in different yet interconnected ways.

The interview guide was developed based on the study's theoretical framework and research questions to ensure coherence between empirical inquiry and conceptual foundations. The questions were structured around five main themes: the background of the company and interviewee, brand philosophy and values, customer collaboration and co-creation practices, the strategic significance of collaboration for brand development, and the challenges and opportunities associated with co-creation. This thematic structure also encouraged interviewees to provide concrete examples, such as specific projects, campaigns, collaborations or customer interactions, to illustrate how co-creatin

takes shape in practice. The full interview guide, including all main and supporting questions, is presented in Appendix 1.

In addition to the interviews, documentary material was collected to complement and contextualise the empirical findings. The documentary data served two purposes within the study. First, it supported triangulation by enabling the comparison of interview responses with publicly communicated brand narratives and practices. Second, it provided additional insight into how the companies present their values, sustainability efforts, collaborations and community-oriented activities to external stakeholders. The material consisted of publicly available digital content published between 2024 and 2025, including company websites, Instagram content, media interviews, podcast appearances, online articles, and campaign-related communication.

*Table 5 Overview of documentary material used in the empirical analysis*

Organization	Type of material	Example of content	Purpose in analysis
Cuitu Oy	Company website	Brand story, sustainability, communication, material innovation, company values	Understanding brand identity, transparency, and communicated co-creation practices
	Instagram content and social media posts	Customer interaction, storytelling, collaboration visibility, community engagement	Examining stakeholder interaction and digital co-creation practices
	Media articles and interviews	Founder interviews, sustainability discussions, public brand communication	Contextualising the company's positioning and values
AIDA Impact	Company website	Social mission, ethical production, organisational values, product communication	Understanding the company's purpose-driven branding and stakeholder orientation
	Instagram content and social media posts	Community engagement, production stories, customer communication	Analysing interaction and relational brand-building practices
	Podcasts, articles and public interviews	Founder reflections, social entrepreneurship, collaboration and impact narratives	Supporting interpretation of co-creation and community-oriented branding

The documentary material played an important role in the analysis, particularly in identifying recurring themes related to authenticity, storytelling, sustainability, stakeholder engagement and community formation. The materials were not analysed as independent data sources but rather used to support and enrich the interpretation of the interview findings. For example, social media communication provided concrete illustrations of how the brands engaged with customers and communities in practice, while website and media content clarified how the companies publicly articulated their values and collaborative approaches.

Using multiple data sources enhances the credibility and depth of qualitative research, as it allows the researcher to compare and contextualise perspectives across different types of evidence (Yin 2003, 97). Overall, the data collection process was designed to ensure depth, relevance and consistency with the study's interpretivist and qualitative orientation. By combining semi-structured interviews with documentary material, the study captures both the lived experiences of the entrepreneurs and the broader narratives through which their brands communicate and co-create meaning with stakeholders.

It is worth noting that some practical challenges emerged during the data collection process. While the interview with Cuitu's co-founder was conducted in real time via video call, allowing for a conversational exchange and natural follow-up questions, the interview with AIDA Impact's founder was carried out asynchronously in the form of recorded voice messages due to scheduling constraints. This approach represented a necessary compromise to secure participation from a relevant informant but also introduced certain limitations. The lack of immediate interaction made it more difficult to pursue spontaneous probing or clarification of responses, which resulted in somewhat shorter and less elaborated answers compared to the live discussion. Nevertheless, the voice message format provided concise and reflective insights that remained valuable for the analysis, and its inclusion ultimately enriched the empirical material by allowing access to an otherwise unavailable case.

### **3.4 Operationalization table**

To ensure consistency between the theoretical framework and the empirical investigation, the research design was structured through operationalization. In qualitative research, operationalization refers to the systematic translation of abstract theoretical concepts into empirically observable themes and questions that guide data collection (Feltcher & Plakoyiannaki 2011, 173–178; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 51–55). In this study, it functioned as a bridge between the conceptual understanding of brand co-creation and its manifestation in the practices of small and medium-sized fashion enterprises.

The main research question “How do fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation?”, together with its three sub-questions, provided the foundation for this process. Based on the theoretical framework, three central thematic dimensions were identified: the role of co-creation in brand development, mechanisms through which co-creation fosters customer engagement and loyalty, and the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing co-creative strategies in SMEs. These dimensions capture key intersections between theory and practice in understanding co-creation as both a strategic and relational process. The interview themes were developed through theoretical alignment with prior literature on co-creation, brand management, and stakeholder engagement. For example, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004, 5–14) and Ind, Iglesias and Schultz (2017, 7–15) emphasize the participatory nature of co-creation, informing questions on stakeholder interaction and collaboration. Similarly, Grönroos (2011) guided the exploration of value co-creation and meaning-making processes in SME contexts.

Following methodological recommendations for case study research (Yin 2003, 33–38; Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, 25–30), clear links were established between theoretical constructs, research questions, and empirical data. In practice, this resulted in an interview guide structured into thematic sections aligned with the research questions (see Appendix 1). The guide combined general and case-specific prompts to ensure comparability across cases while allowing flexibility for context specific insights.

Table 6 below summarizes the operationalization framework by linking the research questions to corresponding empirical themes and selected interview questions, thereby illustrating the connection between the study’s theoretical foundations and data collection.

Table 6 Operationalization table

Research question	Theoretical focus	Empirical theme	Example interview questions
<b>Main research question:</b> How do fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation?	Co-creation as a dialogical and participatory process between firms and stakeholders, grounded in value co-creation and service-dominant logic (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004; Vargo & Lush 2004; Grönroos 2011; Ind, Iglesias & Schultz 2013).	Exploration of how SMEs collaborate with customers, partners, and communities in shaping brand meaning and value.	How does your company collaborate with customers? / At what stage of the brand or product process is the customer involved?
<b>Sub-question 1:</b> What is the role of brand co-creation in the fashion industry?	Strategic and relational role of co-creation in brand identity, differentiation, and authenticity (Merz, He & Vargo 2009; Hatch & Schultz 2010; Ind, Iglesias & Schultz 2017).	Examination of how collaborative practices influence brand positioning, storytelling, and organizational values.	Can you give examples of situations where customers have influenced the development of your company's brand? / Do you consciously aim to build customer collaboration around your brand and if yes how?
<b>Sub-question 2:</b> What are the challenges of implementing brand co-creation strategies in the fashion industry?	Practical and contextual challenges in co-creation within SMEs, such as balancing creative control, managing limited resources, and aligning stakeholder expectations (Frow et al. 2015; Kazadi, Lievens & Mahr 2016; Ind & Coates 2013).	Identification of barriers and tensions in implementing co-creation, including resource limitations, time constraints, and conflicting perspectives.	What are the biggest challenges in implementing customer collaboration and co-creation of the brand? / Do you experience conflicts between the company's and customer's perspective?
<b>Sub-question 3:</b> What opportunities arise from implementing brand co-creation strategies in the fashion industry?	Outcomes and opportunities of co-creation, including enhanced brand loyalty, innovation, and community engagement (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig & Pansari 2016; Ind, Iglesias & Schultz 2017).	Exploration of benefits such as stronger customer relationships, brand advocacy, and creative innovation through collaboration.	Could you describe and example of a successful customer collaboration situation? Why did it work well? / What benefits does your company gain from customer collaboration? And what do customers gain from it?

### 3.5 Data analysis

The empirical material of this study was analysed through thematic analysis. This method was chosen because it makes it possible to identify recurring themes, patterns, and meanings from qualitative data while still allowing sensitivity to the specific context of each case (Braun & Clarke 2006, 79–86). Since the aim of this study is to understand how fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation, thematic analysis offered a suitable way to examine how the interviewees described collaboration, customer relationships, brand identity and community-building practice.

The analysis process was iterative, which means that the material, the research questions and the theoretical framework were revisited several times during the analysis. This was important because the study combines both theory-driven and data-driven interpretation. The theoretical framework, especially the literature on brand co-creation, value co-creation and brand community provided the starting point for the analysis. At the same time, the empirical material was approached openly, allowing themes to emerge from the interviewees' own description and from secondary material.

The analysis began by listening to the interview material several times and transcribing the interviews into written form. This made it possible to become familiar with the tone, content and emphasis of each interview. During this stage, initial notes were made about recurring ideas, such as collaboration, authenticity, sustainability, social impact, customer interaction and the role of the founder. The secondary material, including company websites, social media communication, public presentations and other brand-related content was analysed alongside the interviews. This helped to compare how the companies described their brands publicly with how the founders discussed them in the interviews.

Following an initial review of the material, the analysis focused on themes relevant to the research questions. Some themes were closely connected to the theoretical framework, including co-creation, brand community, stakeholder interaction and value creation. Other themes emerged more inductively from the empirical material, such as founder-driven identity, emotional connection, local collaboration, storytelling and the balance between openness and creative control. This combination of theory-driven and empirically grounded analysis supported the theory-extending purpose of the study, where existing concepts guided the interpretation while the findings also contributed contextual understanding.

The identified themes were subsequently organised into broader analytical categories that reflected the most significant patterns in the material. These categories included relational co-creation, community-based brand building, authenticity, collaboration as a source of visibility and the tension between openness and brand coherence. The two cases were first analysed separately to understand their individual characteristics. They were then compared to identify similarities and differences in how co-creation was understood and practiced. This cross-case comparison formed an important part of the analysis as it demonstrated that co-creation can take different forms even within the same broader industry context.

Throughout the analysis, the interview material and secondary data were used together. The interviews provided insight into the founders' own interpretations and experiences, while the secondary material helped to contextualise these interpretations and make visible how the brands communicate their values externally. In this way, the secondary material did not only provide background information but also supported the analysis of brand narratives, community-building and public communication. The final themes formed the basis for the findings presented in Chapter 4 and the discussion Chapter 5. The purpose of the analysis was not only to describe what the companies do, but to understand how co-creation is given meaning within their brand-building practices. For this reason, attention was paid to both practical activities and the values, stories and relationships through which the companies construct their brand identities. Overall, the thematic analysis made it possible to examine brand co-creation as a relational and value-driven process that is shaped by the specific context of each fashion SME.

### **3.6 Ethical considerations**

This research follows established ethical principles for qualitative research. Because the empirical data were produced through semi-structured interviews and personal correspondence, attention to voluntary participation, informed consent, and the respectful treatment of participants was essential. In line with Diener and Crandall's (1978, 23–24) classic ethical framework, the research aimed to ensure that participation caused no harm, that interviewees took part willingly, that their privacy was protected, and that the information they shared was handled with integrity.

Before each interview, participants received a description of the study's purpose, the themes of the interview, and the ways in which their responses would be used in the thesis. Both interviewees agreed voluntarily to participate and were informed that they could withdraw at any point. Following the recommendations of Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019, 245), consent was understood as an

ongoing process rather than a single administrative moment, and the researcher remained attentive to any indication of discomfort during the interview. Given the interpersonal nature of interview-based studies, ethical considerations extend beyond procedural requirements. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, 61–80) note, qualitative interviews create a temporary conversational relationship on the researcher to ensure that participant's perspectives are represented faithfully and that interpretations remain grounded in the material.

In this thesis, special attention was paid to preserving the tone, meaning, and intention behind each participant's narrative, especially in cases where the interaction differed from the conventional interview format. One of the interviews took place through voice messages due to the participant's scheduling constraints, which limited the possibility for immediate follow-up questions. While this format reduced the conversational flow, it also required heightened interpretive care to avoid overextending the meaning of concise responses. In line with Silverman's (2013, 155–170) guidance on the ethical handling of qualitative data, this research documented the context of each message and consistently cross-checked interpretations with the available material. Anonymity and confidentiality were also considered, but the case company and interviewed persons are named due to their central role in the study. The interviewees statements are presented in a way that avoids unnecessary personal details or identification and no sensitive information beyond what was willingly shared is reported. All data, including audio files, transcript, and notes, were stored securely and used exclusively for the purpose of this thesis.

Finally, the thesis acknowledges the role of researcher positionality. Interpretivist research is shaped by the researcher's background, interest, and assumptions, which influence how questions are asked and how meaning is made (Tracy 2010, 842). The researcher approached the field with a genuine interest in creative industries and collaborative branding practices but remained conscious of the need to balance enthusiasm with analytical distance. Being transparent about these interpretive choices contributes to the study's integrity and supports the trustworthiness of the findings. The ethical considerations in this study aim to reflect a commitment to respectful engagement, interpretive responsibility, and methodological transparency.

### **3.7 Evaluation of the study**

The trustworthiness of this study was assessed according to the framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1958), who conceptualise qualitative research quality through four key dimensions: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Rather than relying on quantitative notions of

validity or reliability, these criteria reflect the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry and provide a means to evaluate how consistently and transparently the research process has been conducted (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 301; Shenton 2004, 63–75).

Ensuring credibility, or the extent to which the findings authentically represent participants' perspectives, was a central concern throughout the study. According to Shenton (2004, 64), credibility can be strengthened by drawing on established research methods, achieving familiarity with the research context, and employing triangulation to validate findings. Similarly, Meyer (2001, 345) emphasises the value of interviews in generating credible data, as they allow the researcher to clarify ambiguous responses, while Yin (2003, 97) and Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, 28) highlight the importance of using multiple data sources. These recommendations were closely followed in the design and execution of this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with knowledgeable key informants, individuals who held central positions in their organisations and were directly involved in brand development and customer collaboration. Their willingness to participate, and openness in sharing experiences strengthened the depth and authenticity of the material. In addition, secondary data, including company websites, press releases, and social media publications, were used to triangulate and contextualise the interviews, ensuring that the interpretations rested on a multifaceted empirical base.

Nevertheless, certain limitations were acknowledged. The second interview, conducted with AIDA Impact, took place through pre-recorded voice messages rather than a live interaction, which restricted the researcher's ability to ask follow-up questions or explore emerging themes. While this may have reduced the spontaneity and detail of the responses, the format nonetheless enabled the company's participation despite scheduling constraints. The limitation was addressed by ensuring all questions were open-ended and reflective, and by complementing the voice responses with relevant secondary materials. These measures, combined with transparency and reflexivity throughout the process, contributed to maintaining the credibility of the findings.

Transferability concerns the degree to which insights from a qualitative study can be meaningfully applied to other contexts (Shenton 2004, 69). In line with Yin's (2003, 32) notion of analytical rather than statistical generalisation this study does not aim to generalise across populations but to extend theoretical understanding of brand co-creation in fashion SMEs. To enable readers to assess the transferability of the results, in depth descriptions have been provided of both the case organisations and the research process. By outlining the background, scale, and strategic orientation of Cuitu and

AIDA Impact the study allows the reader to judge the relevance of its findings to other small and medium-sized creative enterprises. Eskola and Suoranta (1998, 153) emphasise that transparency in describing the empirical setting and data collection process enhances the reader's ability to evaluate the potential applicability of results, a principle that this study followed throughout.

The two cases also represent contrasting yet complementary examples of co-creation. Cuitu's model of circular fashion production and material innovation contrasts with AIDA Impact's socially embedded approach to jewellery design and integration. The comparison of these cases strengthens transferability by illustrating different forms of collaborative value creation within the same broader industry. As Eriksson and Koistinen (2014) note, detailed case description provides the foundation for expanding understanding beyond the specific context, even when direct generalisation is not possible.

Dependability, which refers to the consistency and stability of the research process, was ensured through systematic documentation and transparency. The methodological choices made throughout the study, ranging from case selection to interview design, have been clearly explained, allowing readers to trace the logic of the research. Shenton (2004, 71–72) and Meyer (2001, 348) argue that such clarity is key for enabling other researchers to evaluate or repeat the study. Although perfect replication is not possible in interpretive research (Guba & Lincoln 1994, 110) this study provides sufficient detail to demonstrate a coherent and logical research process. The semi-structured format also supported consistency between the cases while allowing flexibility for individual contexts, thereby ensuring comparability without sacrificing depth.

Finally, discussing confirmability, which is closely linked to objectivity, addresses the extent to which the findings arise from the data rather than the researcher's personal bias or assumptions. As Eskola and Suoranta (1998, 151) observe, total objectivity cannot be achieved in qualitative work, but transparency in data handling and interpretation can enhance confirmability. In this study, confirmability was maintained through reflexive awareness and explicit linkage between empirical evidence and interpretation. The researcher continuously reflected on her own role and potential influence during data collection and analysis, and the use of direct quotations in the analysis section further grounds the interpretations in the participants' own words. Triangulating interviews with secondary sources also reduced subjectivity by cross-checking observation and interpretations.

These measures provide a foundation for the overall reliability of the study. Despite some limitations in data collection, the research design and execution demonstrate credibility through triangulation, transferability through detailed contextualisation, dependability through methodological transparency, and confirmability through examination and evidence-based analysis. The approach reflects a deliberate effort to maintain both academic rigour and interpretive depth, ensuring that the findings offer a reliable and meaningful contribution to the understanding of brand co-creation within fashion SMEs.

## 4 Findings

The empirical finds of the study demonstrate how brand co-creation manifests in the real-world practices of small and medium-sized enterprises in the fashion industry. The purpose is to illustrate how the phenomenon of brand co-creation unfolds within two Finnish fashion SMEs, Cuitu and AIDA Impact. The analysis moves beyond mere description to reveal how theoretical concepts introduced earlier take shape through the everyday practices, strategic choices, and creative processes of the case companies. The discussion proceeds by examining each case individually, highlighting the distinctive yet comparable ways in which co-creation is embedded in their brand philosophies, operational models, and stakeholder relationships. The empirical material consists primarily of semi-structured interviews with the key decision-makers of both firms, complemented by documentary sources such as company websites, media coverage, and social media communication. Together, these materials offer a nuanced understanding of how brand value is collaboratively constructed across different organisational and cultural contexts.

Throughout the analysis, attention is given to the interplay between theory and practice. The findings are interpreted considering the study's conceptual framework, allowing for light theorising that connects empirical observations to broader academic discussions on brand co-creation, stakeholder participation, and sustainable branding. By demonstrating how abstract ideas materialise within concrete business environments, the chapter lays the foundation for the subsequent theoretical reflection later presented in chapter five.

### 4.1 Cuitu: Value-driven brand co-creation in practice

Cuitu provides an illustrative example of how small, value-driven fashion brand translates sustainability and creativity into collaborative practice. This section focuses on how Cuitu's identity and operations enable brand co-creation to emerge as both strategic and cultural process. The empirical materials reveal how co-creation at Cuitu is intertwined with the company's ethical foundations, material experimentation, and community engagement, illustrating how a contemporary fashion SME navigates the intersection of responsibility and innovation.

Cuitu's business model is based on the exclusive use of pre-existing materials, such as surplus fabrics and deadstock sourced from partner organisations. All products are manufactured locally in Finland, reinforcing the company's commitment to transparency and reduced material waste (Cuitu Official Website 2026). This operational model not only reflects circular economy principles but also shapes

how collaboration is approached, as the availability and characteristics of materials influence both design processes and partnerships.

The brand's guiding idea of reducing material waste through the creative use of surplus driving-suit fabric reflects a design philosophy where sustainability and aesthetics are inseparable. Co-founder Anna Kytövuori describes the origins of this approach as deeply personal, stemming from an experience of witnessing marine pollution while diving in Bali. This encounter shaped her conviction that environmental responsibility must be built into every decision the company makes. Sustainability therefore functions not as a marketing label but as a moral and creative compass that frames the company's collaborations, partnerships, and brand communication.

Cuitu approaches co-creation as a dynamic dialogue rather than through formalised structures. Kytövuori explained that the firm's small size allows for adaptability, and its project-based nature encourages continuous interaction between the founders, collaborators, and clients. This agility supports a collaborative environment where ideas can develop organically while remaining guided by clear values of equality, curiosity, and transparency. The company's openness to unconventional combinations and creative risks enables it to form connections that feel both spontaneous and authentic, a quality that is central to its brand identity. In addition to its internal design philosophy, Cuitu actively engages in collaborations that extend its co-creative practices beyond firm level. These include partnerships with textile and technology actors, such as BYBORRE and TREE DPP, which combine material innovation with digital traceability solutions (LinkedIn Cuitu 2025). Such collaborations illustrate how co-creation in fashion SMEs can operate across both physical and digital dimensions.

Collaborative projects further illustrate how Cuitu positions co-creation as both an economic and symbolic process. Partnerships such as the upcycling of large advertising banners for shopping centres, or the creation of visual installations for the Kesärauha festival in Turku, serve multiple purposes. They generate visibility, communicate the brand's sustainability ethos, and transform material reuse into shared cultural expression. Kytövuori described these initiatives as moments where the brand becomes "physically present in the city where everything started", suggesting that such collaborations foster emotional as well as material connections with local audiences. These projects exemplify how co-creation can extend beyond product design to encompass storytelling and community building. Cuitu also incorporates technological elements into its production, such as NFC tags and digital product passports, which allow customers to access information about the product's

origin and lifecycle. These tools enhance transparency and create new forms of interaction between the brand and its customers, supporting co-creation through information sharing and traceability (LinkedIn Cuitu 2025).

Cuitu's approach to partnerships demonstrates the balance between openness and control that characterises co-creation in small enterprises. While the company welcomes external ideas and aesthetic influences, it maintains strict adherence to its own values and production principles. As Kytövuori noted, curiosity drives experimentation, but boundaries must remain clear to preserve brand coherence. This balance reflects theoretical discussions of co-creation as both a source of innovation and a potential risk to brand integrity (Ind, Iglesias & Schultz 2013, 10–15). At Cuitu, coherence is maintained by aligning all collaborations with a consistent moral and visual narrative. Like many early-stage fashion SMEs, Cuitu operates under resource constraints that influence its ability to scale operations and expand internationally. Dependence on leftover materials and limited production capacity further shape the scope and speed of its growth.

Resource constraints pose ongoing challenges to the development of new projects, making prioritisation and value alignment crucial. Kytövuori emphasised that the most demanding phase of collaboration is the initial stage, where partners must align their goals, values, and expectations. Once this shared understanding is established, the process tends to develop more smoothly, supported by trust and mutual motivation. This observation aligns with prior research highlighting transparency, communication, and trust as key elements in co-creative relationships (Kazadi & Mahr 2016, 528–533).

Cuitu's interaction with its customers similarly reflects an intentional yet understated form of co-creation. Rather than relying on structured feedback systems, the company engages customers through transparent storytelling, limited-edition releases, and a distinctive visual identity. Social media functions primarily as a platform for authenticity and education rather than direct consultation. Kytövuori described this approach as maintaining warmth and accessibility, suggesting that the brand seeks connection through shared values rather than continuous interaction. The result is a relatively small but highly engaged community that identifies strongly with Cuitu's aesthetics and ethical principles. Overall, the findings portray Cuitu as a brand that approaches co-creation as a mindset rather than a formalised process. Collaboration functions both as an operational necessity and as a creative philosophy, allowing the company to translate sustainability into a narrative practice that invites participation while maintaining artistic autonomy.

## 4.2 AIDA Impact: Purpose-driven brand co-creation in practice

AIDA Impact represents a distinct approach to co-creation in the fashion industry, one that merges social entrepreneurship, craftsmanship, and ethical design into a unified brand narrative. Founded in 2017 by designer and entrepreneur Elina Siira, the company illustrates how purpose-driven business practices can integrate social impact and aesthetic value within a commercially viable model. Rather than focusing primarily on material sustainability, AIDA Impact grounds its operations in human relationships, embedding co-creation within the process of inclusion, employment, and storytelling.

AIDA Impact's business model is based on the production of handcrafted jewellery in Helsinki, using high-quality natural and recycled materials. The company operates with a small team and collaborate with community partners to employ immigrant women and mothers in Finland, integrating social impact directly into its production processes (AIDA Impact Official Website 2025). This structure allows the company to embed co-creation not only in design, but also in the organisation of work and social relationships. Siira described the origins of AIDA Impact as a response to a personal and societal need: to demonstrate that business could be both profitable and socially meaningful. Drawing on her experience in the corporate world and her long-standing passion for design, she sought to establish a company that would merge beauty with responsibility.

From the outset, AIDA Impact's purpose was to employ immigrant women and mothers in Finland, offering them meaningful work and a pathway to integration through jewellery making. However, as Siira emphasised, this mission was never intended as charity. The company's employees are valued as skilled professionals whose craftsmanship forms the foundation of the brand's authenticity. This integration of social inclusion and artistry demonstrates how co-creation can extend beyond product development to encompass the creation of shared purpose and identity. This also reflects the multi-dimensional nature of the brand's identity. AIDA Impact does not merely produce jewellery as material objects but rather constructs a holistic brand culture that intertwines design, social mission, and community engagement. Each product is embedded within broader narratives of integration, empowerment, and ethical design, linking aesthetic value with social meaning.

The data reveal that AIDA Impact approaches collaboration in a way that differs fundamentally from Cuitu's partnership-driven model. For AIDA Impact, co-creation is not structured through external alliances but is embedded in the company's internal culture. Siira explained that the brand does not engage in formal co-design or feedback systems with customers. Instead, it relies on continuous

dialogue, empathy, and close observation of social and cultural developments. She noted that her role as creative director involves being “constantly alert to what is happening in the world”, which allows her to anticipate trends and respond to unspoken customer desires. This proactive orientation reflects the brand’s belief that meaningful design emerges not from following consumer demands but from intuitively interpreting them before they are articulated. In this sense, co-creation becomes an interpretive process, where the designers translate collective aspirations into tangible forms.

A particularly illustrative example of this approach is the brand’s “Wedding Jewellery Fitting” service, which combines personal storytelling with custom design. By explicitly highlighting that each product supports the employment of immigrant women, the brand creates a tangible connection between consumption and social impact. This reinforces how co-creation in AIDA Impact is experienced through meaning and emotional engagement rather than direct design participation.

A central insight from the interview was Siira’s emphasis on maintaining brand integrity. While customer feedback and social media interactions are valued, she states that “a brand must have a clear line”. Attempting to please everyone, she explained, would risk diluting the company’s identity. This conviction resonates with theoretical perspectives that view brand co-creation as a balance between openness and control, where participation is encouraged but the brand’s core narrative remains non-negotiable (Iglesias, Ind & Alfaro 2013). For AIDA Impact, this balance ensures that collaboration strengthens rather than fragments the brand. In this sense, AIDA Impact exemplifies a broader shift in the fashion and design industry, where brands are expected to align with consumer values and demonstrate tangible contributions to society. The company’s success is therefore not measured solely through financial performance, but also through the social value it generates, including employment opportunities, narratives of empowerment, and strengthened community connections.

The social dimension of AIDA’s operations also defines its community-oriented identity. As Siira explained, the company’s customer base is diverse but united by shared values of aesthetics, responsibility, and meaning. Jewellery is often purchased as a gift, symbolising connection and empathy, values that deeply reflect the company’s internal culture. Through these exchanges, AIDA Impact cultivates a subtle form of co-creation in which customers participate emotionally rather than materially in the brand’s purpose. This perspective reframes co-creation as an act of belonging, where value arises from alignment with a brand’s ethical and aesthetic view on the world.

Social media plays a central role in sustaining this connection. Siira described Instagram as an essential space for maintaining visibility and nurturing relationships, though the brand avoids excessive advertising. Instead, AIDA Impact relies on authentic, self-produced content and collaborations with individuals who naturally share its values. This approach aligns with findings from her Thought Leaders Talk (Siira, Aalto Ventures Program, 2023), where she highlighted authenticity and empathy as the most powerful tools for brand communication. In her words “empathy is a strategic business decision”. This statement captures how the brand’s social mission translates into managerial practice where compassion becomes both a moral stance and a competitive asset.

The integration of purpose and profit is further reflected in AIDA Impact’s business development. During its first years, the company achieved steady financial growth and profitability without external funding, relying instead on careful cost management and organic customer relationships. Siira’s strategic choice to not take state start-up grants and focus on self-sufficiency underscores a pragmatic understanding of entrepreneurship. In her view “a business should be built through action, not waiting for perfect conditions”. This principle, shared in the Thought Leaders Talk, positions AIDA Impact as a living example of how purpose-driven SMEs can achieve resilience by grounding their strategy.

Despite the company’s success, AIDA Impact faces inherent challenges regarding limited resources which can be seen in a restricted scope of community engagement and international expansion and maintaining brand coherence while growing remains an ongoing goal. Siira sees AIDA’s future development as depended on deepening its relationships with both its employees and its customers. One take, that Siira shared regarding the future is that she personally has a desire to engage in more ethnographic research to better understand evolving social and cultural dynamics, reflecting an awareness that continuous learning is a form of co-creation. Reflecting on the research question, AIDA Impact demonstrates how co-creation can take place through human interaction, shared meaning, and social empathy rather than direct design participation. The brand embodies a relational view of co-creation, where collaboration unfolds as an ongoing process of listening, interpreting, and connecting. By grounding its business model in empathy and craftsmanship, AIDA Impact bridges the domains of commerce and social value, showing how purpose-driven entrepreneurship can expand the understanding of brand co-creation in the fashion industry.

### 4.3 Cross-case analysis

The two cases, Cuitu and AIDA Impact, provide complementary perspectives on how fashion SMEs engage in brand co-creation. While both companies share a commitment to responsibility and authenticity, they embody different interpretations of what collaboration means in practice. The analysis of their narratives reveals that co-creation is not singular process but a continuum of relational practices, shaped by the company's values, resources, and strategic orientation. Together, these cases offer empirical insight into the ways in which contemporary fashion enterprises construct meaning and value through collaboration, aligning closely with the study's research questions.

In relation to the first research question, concerning the role of brand co-creation in the fashion industry, both Cuitu and AIDA Impact demonstrate that co-creation serves as a mechanism for embedding values into practice. At Cuitu, collaboration functions as a form of material storytelling, transforming sustainability principles into tangible expressions through creative partnerships. At AIDA Impact, by contrast, co-creation operates primarily on a social and emotional level. The brand's community-oriented ethos transforms its employees, customers, and followers into participants in a shared purpose. In both cases, co-creation becomes a way of making meaning rather than merely producing outcomes. This observation resonates with the view that co-creation enables brands to establish authenticity through shared values and collective identity (Ind, Iglesias & Schultz 2013, 10–15).

The second research question, addressing the challenges of implementing co-creation strategies, is reflected in recurring tension between openness and control. Both companies recognise the importance of involving external actors but emphasise the need to preserve brand coherence. For Cuitu, the challenge lies in balancing creative experimentation with resource constraints and maintaining consistent quality within small-scale production. For AIDA Impact, the challenge is more conceptual: sustaining the integrity of a purpose-driven brand while engaging with a broad and diverse audience. These challenges align with prior research suggesting that co-creation in SMEs requires careful negotiation of autonomy and collaboration to avoid identity dilution (Frow et al. 2015, 468–474; Kazadi, Lievens & Mahr 2016, 528–534).

Regarding the third research question, which explores the opportunities arising from co-creation, the findings point to several intertwined benefits. Both cases show that co-creation can enhance brand authenticity, strengthen community engagement, and create differentiation in a competitive market.

For Cuitu, collaboration opens opportunities for visibility and innovation through cross-sector partnerships. For AIDA Impact, co-creation provides a foundation for long-term trust and emotional connection, reinforcing the brand's credibility and purpose. These outcomes highlight how co-creation, when grounded in clear values, can become strategic resource that combines creative and ethical capital (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004, 5–14; Payne, Storbacka & Frow 2008, 84–92).

While the two companies differ in their approaches, they converge on one essential point: co-creation, to be successful must be guided by integrity. Whether expressed through material sustainability, as in Cuitu, or through social empathy, as in AIDA Impact, the process relies on mutual trusts, transparency, and alignment of values. These insights provide an empirical foundation for the following discussion chapter, where the implications of these findings are examined in relation to existing literature and the broader context of contemporary fashion branding.

## 5 Discussion

In this research the key findings of the study are presented by analysing the empirical material through the theoretical framework and by revisiting the research questions that have guided the work. Where chapter 4 focused on describing the two case companies and the data collection process, the purpose here is to interpret how the entrepreneurs' accounts illuminate the dynamics of brand co-creation within the SMEs fashion industry. The analysis moves between the empirical cases and establishes theoretical perspectives, gradually revealing how co-creation is practiced, what challenges it entails, and what opportunities it opens for small fashion enterprises. Through this interpretive approach, the chapter also identifies patterns that extend or nuance existing literature, thus offering the basis for theoretical contributions developed later in the discussion.

### 5.1 The role of brand co-creation in fashion SMEs

Both Cuitu and AIDA Impact view co-creation as an essential part of their everyday work, although in different forms and with different degrees of intentionality. In line with Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004, 5–14) view of co-creation as a process shaped by interaction, transparency, and shared meaning, the cases illustrate that co-creation emerges not only from formalised initiatives but also from informal exchanges embedded in the company's daily activities. In Cuitu's case, co-creation is visible in its ongoing collaborations with artist, event organisers, and corporate partners, where customer and stakeholder contribute to material choice, visual details, and product-specific decisions. These collaborative relationships reinforce the company's identity as a brand grounded in material curiosity, sustainability, and aesthetic openness. Co-creation thus becomes intertwined with Cuitu's broader mission: to demonstrate that creative value can be generated from surplus materials through shared experimentation.

AIDA Impact, in contrast, emphasises a creative direction that is carefully held by the founder. Although Elina Siira engages actively with customers and gathers feedback, she clearly distinguishes between listening and following. Co-creation here takes shape through interpretation rather than direct influence; it is the entrepreneur's awareness of societal currents, aesthetic sensibilities, and community dynamics that allows her to anticipate customer desires before they are articulated. This resonates with Ind and Coates' (2013, 88–93) notion that meaningful co-creation can arise when brands create the conditions for participation without relinquishing their identity.

Despite these differences, both companies demonstrate that co-creation in fashion SMEs functions less as a formalised technique and more as an integrated mindset. The role of co-creation is not to democratise every design decision but to sustain a dynamic exchange between the brand and its community, allowing the brand's meaning to evolve in dialogue with its stakeholders. This insight refines existing theory by highlighting that in small creative enterprises, co-creation often supports coherence rather than plurality: it reinforces a distinctive brand ethos while inviting others to contribute within that framework.

## **5.2 Challenges in implementing brand co-creation**

The empirical material reveals a set of challenges that echo but also complicate those discussed in the literature. Prior research has emphasised the risk of losing strategic focus, the difficulty of aligning stakeholder expectations, and the resource demands associated with collaborative processes. These concerns are visible in the cases, yet they manifest differently in the context of small fashion brands. For Cuitu, the most pressing challenge relates to resource allocation. Each collaboration requires significant time and coordination, especially because the brand works with surplus materials, which introduce inherent constraints. Securing alignment at the beginning of a project is crucial, as mismatched expectations can quickly escalate into inefficiencies. This reflects Kazadi, Lievens and Mahr's (2016, 530-533) argument that co-creation demands shared understanding and relational trust, but the case shows how fragile the alignment can be in small teams where responsibilities are broad, and production is highly material dependent.

AIDA Impact faces a different type of challenge: maintaining brand coherence when exposed to diverse customer expectations. Because the brand's value proposition rests strongly on artistic vision and purpose-driven identity, accommodating too many external opinions could dilute its character. Siira highlights the importance of protecting the brand's authorial voice, which complicates traditional assumptions that customer involvement always enhances value. The challenge in this moment is not the lack of customer input but the discernment required to separate meaningful insights from noise – a nuance that is insufficiently addressed in existing co-creation literature, which often assumes that openness is universally beneficial. Both cases therefore show that co-creation is not a neutral inherently positive process. It introduces tensions between openness and control, between collaboration and brand discipline. For small fashion SMEs, these tensions are intensified by limited resources and the need to maintain a recognisable aesthetic identity. The findings thus underline the importance of strategically moderated co-creation, where participation is encouraged but not allowed to compromise the brand's core values.

### 5.3 Opportunities emerging from co-creation

The findings of this study indicate that co-creation does more than enable isolated collaborative moments between fashion SMEs and their stakeholders. It creates a set of strategic and relational opportunities that can meaningfully enhance brand development. In both case companies, co-creation appears as a catalyst for deepening the brand's resonance, expanding its cultural relevance, and strengthening the ties between the firm and its surrounding communities.

Across both interviews, co-creation emerged as a source of creative stimulation that allows the brand to evolve through external perspectives. For Cuitu, the collaborative work with artists, cultural organizations, and local businesses generates new forms of expression that would not arise within the company alone. These collaborations extend the brand's aesthetic vocabulary and introduce narratives that enrich its identity. Similarly, AIDA Impact emphasizes on creative receptivity by paying close attention to cultural currents, societal shifts, and everyday conversations with customers, which enables the brand to identify opportunities before they become trends. Although AIDA Impact does not formalise co-creation in its design processes, the founder's dialogical approach to customers creates an environment in which ideas circulate fluidly and feed into the creative direction of the brand.

A second set of opportunities relates to visibility and cultural positioning. The interviews suggest that co-creation expands the reach of both companies by opening doors to networks they would not access through traditional marketing efforts. In Cuitu's case, high-profile events and partnerships, such as festival collaborations or projects involving repurposed materials, provided not only exposure but also symbolic value. These collaborations reinforce the brand's identity as an innovative, community-oriented actor in the Finnish fashion landscape. For AIDA Impact, community-based events and social media engagement worked as mechanisms that strengthened relational bonds while simultaneously increasing the brand's cultural presence. In both cases, co-creation served to embed the brands within broader cultural ecosystems, making them relevant beyond the commercial boundaries of their product categories.

The third opportunity emerging from the data concerns brand trust and relational depth. Although neither company explicitly frames co-creation as a loyalty-building strategy both demonstrate that meaningful engagement with stakeholders can lead to forms of which responds actively to new launches, and AIDA's strong emphasis on shared values and emotional resonance, both point to the

ways in which co-creation fosters a sense of belonging. This finding aligns with prior research highlighting the role of emotional and value-driven interactions in strengthening consumer-brand relationships. Even when collaboration is not expressed through formalised co-design processes, the act of involving customers in the brand world, whether through stories, shared experiences, or open communication, creates opportunities for the development of trust and continuity.

The findings also suggest that co-creation can support the strategic scaling of fashion SMEs. For Cuitu, internationalisation efforts are intertwined with the visibility gained through collaborative projects, which help position the brand as credible and distinct in new markets. For AIDA, co-creation in the form of ethnographic observation and cultural insight provides a foundation for future expansion by deepening the brand's understanding of global audiences. While these forms of co-creation operate differently, both illustrate how collaborative relationships contribute to the strategic evolution of SME brands, providing opportunities that extend beyond immediate product development.

Finally, the empirical material points to a broader opportunity that surpasses the individual companies. Co-creation seems to function as a mechanism through which fashion SMEs can articulate their values in practice. Whether through sustainable material use, socially responsible employment, or community building, the act of co-creation makes these values visible and tangible. This observation resonates with literature suggesting that co-creation can strengthen the authenticity and transparency of brands, especially when value-driven narratives are central to their identity. For Cuitu and AIDA Impact co-creation is not simply an operational choice, instead it can be viewed as a way of embodying their principles in collaborative action. These findings indicate that co-creation opens a multifaceted set of opportunities for fashion SMEs, ranging from creative expansion and increased visibility to deeper customer relationships and strategic growth. While the nature and intensity of co-creation differ between the two cases, both demonstrate how collaborative practices can become a foundational source of value in the development of small fashion brands operating in competitive and rapidly evolving markets.

#### **5.4 Brand community and community-based co-creation**

An important dimension emerging from the empirical material is the role of brand community in shaping how co-creation is experienced and sustained within fashion SMEs. While both case companies, Cuitu and AIDA Impact, approach collaboration differently, the research suggest that co-

creation is closely connected to the development of communities built around shared values, aesthetics and emotional identification. From this viewpoint, co-creation extends beyond product development or stakeholder participation and becomes part of a broader social process through which brands create belonging and cultural meaning. The empirical findings align with Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001, 412–418) understanding of brand community as a non-geographically bound social structure formed through shared consciousness, rituals and moral responsibility. In both cases, customers are not positioned exclusively as buyers but as participants who engage with the values and narratives surrounding the brand. Importantly, these communities emerge not through formal membership structures or organised fan cultures, but through ongoing interaction, shared storytelling and symbolic alignment.

For Cuitu, brand community emerges strongly through local collaborations, shared sustainability values and visibility within cultural events. Secondary material, including the company’s website and LinkedIn communication, highlights the importance of curiosity, openness and collaboration as central elements of the brand identity. For example, Cuitu shares on its website that “We believe that by collaborating, we can help allocate leftover materials more sustainably, raise awareness about conscious consumerism in fashion, and build attractive circular brands” (Cuitu Official Website 2026). This ideology reflects how collaboration itself becomes part of the company’s community-building strategy. Rather than only focusing on products, the brand constructs a shared narrative around sustainability, experiences and local creative culture. Collaborations with festivals, artists and design partners therefore function as mechanisms for strengthening emotional and symbolic ties between the brand and its audiences.

Similarly, AIDA Impact’s community is built around shared social and ethical values. The findings indicate that customers engage with the brand not only because of the jewellery itself, but because of what the brand represents socially and culturally. Secondary material from Siira’s Thought Leaders Talk (Aalto Ventures Program 2023) further supports this argument. During the talk, Siira described empathy as “a strategic business decision”, highlighting how emotional understanding and human connection are positioned at the core of the company’s operations. This perspective is also visible in the company’s public communication, where stories of inclusion, craftsmanship and meaningful work remain central throughout.

Unlike traditional views of co-creation that focus primarily on customer participation in product development, both cases demonstrate that community-based co-creation can also emerge through

shared emotional and symbolic experiences. Customers contribute to the brand community by engaging with its narratives, sharing its values and participating in its social world through events, social media interactions and everyday consumption practices. This finding extends earlier research by suggesting that, within fashion SMEs, co-creation often operates less through direct co-design and more through relational and cultural participation. Social media plays an important role in sustaining these communities. Although neither company relies heavily on traditional advertising, both use digital platforms to maintain visibility and reinforce their identity. In Cuitu's case, social media supports transparency and communicates the creative reuse of materials, while AIDA Impact uses Instagram to strengthen emotional closeness and authenticity. These findings support previous literature arguing that digital platforms enable ongoing interaction and help brands maintain community engagement through continuous communication (Le et al. 2022, 1042–1049).

Simultaneously, the findings reveal that brand community within SMEs remain relatively fragile and dependent on authenticity. Since both companies are strongly founder-driven and value-oriented, maintaining trust and coherence becomes essential. Excessive commercialisation or overexpansion could risk weakening the emotional closeness that currently characterises their communities. Co-creation therefore appears not only as an opportunity for engagement, but also as a responsibility requiring careful balance between growth, participation and brand integrity. Overall, the findings suggest that brand community functions as an important mechanism through which co-creation becomes meaningful in fashion SMEs. Rather than existing separately from co-creation, community acts as the social environment in which collaborative value creation is sustained. Through shared narratives, emotional identification and ongoing interaction both Cuitu and AIDA Impact demonstrate how small fashion brands can create communities that strengthen loyalty, trust and long-term brand relevance.

## **5.5 Cross-case analytical reflections**

A comparative reading of the two cases reveals that co-creation functions as a shared strategic resource, but it takes shape through configurations that differ significantly in structure, intentionality, and underlying values. These differences are not merely operational as they reflect deeper orientations toward branding, creativity, and the role of the consumer in shaping the identity of a fashion SME. Examining these variations side by side provides a more nuanced understanding of the opportunities and frictions inherent in collaborative brand creation.

Cuitu approaches co-creation as a fluid and opportunity-driven practice. Collaboration emerges from personal networks, local initiatives, and unexpected encounters that become integral to the brand's visibility and evolution. This openness to serendipity is consistent with its ethos of curiosity and experimentation. Yet the company's microscale and flexible organisational structure mean that co-creation is not a tightly managed strategy but rather an adaptive response to emerging possibilities. From a theoretical perspective, this positions Cuitu closer to the so-called open end of co-creation, where collaboration can be seen intertwined with the brand's creative process and material experimentation. At the same time, this openness creates pressure on the company's limited resources, as each collaboration requires negotiation, alignment, and the ability to translate shared ideas into viable products or narratives. Co-creation is thus both a driver of creativity and a source of operational strain.

AIDA Impact, in contrast, engages in co-creation in a more implicit and interpretive manner. The brand remains attentive to customers, but this attention does not equate to granting influence over design decisions or brand direction. Instead, AIDA's co-creation resembles an ongoing dialogue where meaning is constructed through shared values, cultural awareness, and long-term relational engagement. Collaboration is less about co-designing physical products and more about co-producing the symbolic and emotional world surrounding the brand. This interpretive form of co-creation aligns with literature on value co-creation as a meaning-making process rather than a purely operational activity. Yet it also raises a critical tension leading to think about the brand's strong commitment to aesthetic coherence and narrative integrity, which places limits on customer influence, positioning AIDA in a paradox where it seeks to foster community while simultaneously protecting creative autonomy.

Comparing the cases highlights that co-creation in fashion SMEs is not a uniform practice, but a strategic orientation shaped by each company's identity, values, and constraints. Cuitu's approach demonstrates how collaboration can elevate a brand's visibility and contribute to its entrepreneurial momentum. The company's partnerships generate symbolic capital and material experimentation that reinforce its sustainability narrative. However, the reliance on external opportunities and the need to navigate resource limitations expose the fragility of this model. Without careful prioritisation, co-creation may risk becoming overly reactive, leading to inconsistencies in brand focus or efficiency.

On the other hand, AIDA Impact's approach shows how co-creation can strengthen brand authenticity and emotional resonance. Its emphasis on shared values and cultural sensitivity fosters a form of

relational capital that extends beyond individual products. A certain level of protective stance toward brand aesthetics raises questions about how inclusive or participatory this co-creation can truly become. During the research it was found that AIDA Impact benefits from customer proximity and community engagement, but its model illustrates that co-creation in strongly identity-driven brands can remain selective and asymmetrical, with the company maintaining interpretive authority. Despite these differences, both cases underscore a recurring pattern where co-creation operates as a stabilising force in uncertain environments.

This phenomenon can be seen through collaborations that expand visibility or through conversational practices that sustain emotional connection where co-creation can be viewed as a mechanism for navigating the competitive and saturated landscape of contemporary fashion. This reflects theoretical perspectives suggesting that co-creation contributes to organisational resilience by reinforcing stakeholder relationships and enabling brands to adapt meaningfully to shifting cultural conditions. Nevertheless, the cases also reveal that co-creation introduces tensions between openness and control, between inclusivity and brand integrity, and between creative vision and resource limitations.

Comparing the findings of the two case companies of this research deepen the understanding of co-creation beyond the boundaries of individual case narratives. The results show that co-creation is either inherently democratic nor uniformly strategic, but it can be seen as a situated practice shaped by identity, ambitions, and limitations of each organisation. While both companies benefit from engaging with their communities, they do so through distinct pathways that illuminate the multifaceted role co-creation plays within the branding processes of fashion SMEs. By examining these divergences and complementarities, the analysis provides a more textured interpretation of how co-creation contributes to the constructions, maintenance, and evolution of contemporary fashion brands.

## 6 Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how small and medium-sized enterprises in the fashion industry engage in collaborative brand co-creation. By studying two Finnish fashion SMEs, Cuitu and AIDA Impact, the research explored how co-creation takes shape in practice, what forms of value it generates and how it influences brand development within resource-constrained yet creatively driven entrepreneurial environments. While co-creation has been widely discussed within branding, marketing and service research its manifestations within creative SMEs have remained comparatively underexplored. This study contributes to this gap by illustrating how co-creation is experienced, interpreted and enacted within fashion enterprises that combine aesthetic ambition, sustainability values and community-oriented branding.

The findings demonstrate that co-creation within fashion SMEs is not primarily organised through formal structures or clearly defined participation mechanisms. Instead, it emerges through ongoing interaction, shared values, relational proximity and continuous dialogue between the brand and its stakeholders. In both case companies, co-creation was closely connected to the founder's identities, the symbolic meanings associated with the brands and the communities surrounding them. Rather than functioning solely as a strategy for innovation or product development, co-creation operated as a broader process of meaning-making through which relationships, trust and brand identity were continuously negotiated and reinforced.

The findings also highlight that co-creation in creative SMEs may take highly interpretive and symbolic forms. Customers were not necessarily involved in direct product co-design or strategic decision-making, but they nevertheless contribute to the development of brand meaning through feedback, interaction, storytelling and shared cultural values. At the same time, both companies maintained strong aesthetic direction and clear brand identities, suggesting that co-creation does not inherently weaken creative control or authorship. Instead, the findings indicate that openness and creative authority can coexist within collaborative brand-building processes. Overall, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of co-creation within the context of fashion SMEs by emphasising its relational, interpretive and culturally embedded nature.

## 6.1 Theoretical conclusions

A central theoretical insight arising from this study is that co-creation in fashion SMEs operates primarily as embedded relational practice rather than as a structured managerial process. While previous co-creation literature frequently conceptualises co-creation through formal participation mechanisms and intentionally designed interaction platforms, the findings of this study suggest that within creative SMEs co-creation emerges through everyday communication, long-term relationships, intuitive collaboration and shared values. This finding extends service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lush, 2004) and service logic (Grönroos, 2008) by illustrating how value co-creation in small fashion firms becomes deeply intertwined with entrepreneurial identity, brand philosophy and relational proximity.

The findings also refine existing theoretical assumptions concerning the relationship between co-creation and creative control. Much of the existing literature associate's co-creation with decentralised authorship and increasing consumer influence over brand meaning. However, the empirical findings demonstrate that co-creation within fashion SMEs may coexist with strong creative direction and clearly defined aesthetic boundaries. In both Cuitu and AIDA Impact, collaboration functioned primarily as a relational and interpretive process rather than a transfer of creative authority to consumers. Customers contributed to the brand mainly through values, narratives, feedback and cultural signals instead of direct product co-design. This suggests that co-creation in creative industries may involve negotiated openness rather than shared authorship, allowing firms to maintain coherent brand identities while still engaging stakeholders in meaningful ways.

Another important theoretical insight concerns the relationship between co-creation and brand communities. Existing literature frequently presented brand communities as outcomes of successful co-creation processes. However, the findings of this study suggest an alternative dynamic within fashion SMEs: community often precedes co-creation rather than emerging solely from it. In both case companies, collaborative practices were enabled by pre-existing trust, shared values, emotional attachment, and symbolic alignment between the brand and its audience. Loyal consumers and value-aligned stakeholders created the social conditions through which co-creation became meaningful and possible. This finding contributes to brand community literature by suggesting that community formation may function not only because of co-creation but also as one of its foundational preconditions.

Finally, the findings contribute to a broader understanding of co-creation by emphasising its symbolic and interpretive dimensions. Rather than focusing only on participatory design or innovation outcomes, the cases demonstrate how co-creation in fashion SMEs unfolds through storytelling, emotional identification, sustainability narratives and shared cultural meanings. Consumers participated in the co-creation process by interpreting, circulating and reinforcing brand meanings within digital and social environments. This extends managerial perspectives on co-creation by integrating them more closely with theories of symbolic consumption, identity work and emotional value creation. Particularly within fashion branding, co-creation appears closely connected to consumer's desire for self-expression, belonging and value alignment. Together, these findings contribute to a more differentiated understanding of co-creation as a relational, identity-driven and culturally embedded process within creative SMEs. By linking co-creation theory with branding foundations, community formation, symbolic value and entrepreneurial identity, this research expands current discussion on collaborative brand building in the fashion industry.

## **6.2 Contribution to previous literature**

This research contributes to previous literature by extending co-creation research into the context of fashion SMEs, a setting that remains comparatively unexplored within branding and service literature. While much existing co-creation research has focused on larger organisations and structured participation models, this thesis demonstrates how collaborative brand-building practices unfold within smaller, founder-driven creative firms characterised by strong aesthetic identities and limited organisational resources. In addition, the findings refine current understanding of co-creation by demonstrating that collaborative practices do not necessarily require formal participation structures or the transfer of creative authority to consumers. Instead, co-creation may emerge through interpretive, relational and symbolic forms of interaction that allows brands to maintain coherent identities while still engaging stakeholders in meaningful ways.

This study also contributes to brand community literature by suggesting that community formation may function as a prerequisite for co-creation rather than merely its outcome. The findings indicate that shared values, trust and emotional attachment create the conditions that enable collaborative practices to emerge within fashion SMEs. This perspective offers a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between community and co-creation within branding research. Finally, the research connects co-creation theory more closely with symbolic and emotional dimensions of branding by illustrating how collaborative value creation emerges through storytelling, sustainability

communication, identity expression and shared cultural meanings. In doing so, the study broadens existing perspectives on co-creation beyond product development and innovation, highlighting its role in shaping emotional attachment, authenticity, and relational value within contemporary fashion branding.

### **6.3 Managerial implications**

In addition to the theoretical implications discussed in the previous section, this study also provides several managerial implications for companies operating in founder-driven and value-oriented industries. The findings suggest that community formation around brands does not necessarily require formal membership structures or highly organised brand communities. Instead, communities may emerge through continuous interaction, shared storytelling, symbolic alignment and consistent communication between the brand and its consumers. The findings indicate that managers should pay increasing attention to the symbolic and emotional dimensions of branding. Consumers were not only attached to products themselves, but also the values, meanings and identities associated with the brands. This suggests that companies may strengthen consumer commitment by communicating clear values and maintaining coherent brand narratives across different communication channels. At the same time, authenticity appears to play a central role in sustaining trust and long-term engagement.

The study also highlights the importance of founder visibility in community-oriented branding. In both companies, founders functioned as symbolic representatives of the brand and its values. Their communication, personal stories and interaction with consumers contribute to the development of stronger emotional connections and perceptions of authenticity. For managers, this suggests that founder communication may operate as an important strategic resource in strengthening brand identity and consumer relationships. However, the findings simultaneously indicate that founder-centred branding requires careful management as inconsistencies between communicated values and organisational actions may weaken consumer trust.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that companies can support community development by creating opportunities for ongoing participation and interaction rather than relying solely on transactional relationships. Digital platforms and social media appear to function as important environments where consumers engage with brand narratives, share experiences and reinforce shared meanings with other community members. Consequently, managers should view communication not only as promotional activity, but also as a continuous relational process through which communities and consumers identification are maintained. The findings may be particularly relevant for companies operating in

industries where consumption is closely connected to identity, construction, lifestyle expression and shared values. In such contexts, symbolic alignment between consumers and brands may contribute to stronger emotional attachment, long-term loyalty and deeper forms of engagement. Thus, the study suggests that companies may benefit from approaching branding and community-building as long-term processes centred around trust, authenticity and shared meaning-making rather than solely short-term marketing objectives.

Finally, the findings indicate that smaller firms may benefit from their ability to maintain close and flexible relationships with their communities. Unlike larger organisations, SMEs are often able to engage more directly and personally with consumers, collaborators and stakeholders. This relational closeness may strengthen perceptions of authenticity and enable more meaningful forms of interaction which can function as an important competitive advantage in contemporary value-driven markets.

#### **6.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

In this research the analysis was centred on two Finnish fashion SMEs, and while the aim was analytical rather than statistical generalisation, the findings are nonetheless shaped by cultural, geographical, and industry-specific conditions in which the companies operate, which is why it is important to acknowledge that this thesis is defined by its context. Future research could broaden the scope by examining co-creation in fashion SMEs in other countries, broaden the viewpoint from fashion SMEs to creative SMEs, or by comparing creative and non-creative industries to explore how domain-specific dynamics influence collaborative practices.

Another limitation related to perspective. In this thesis, co-creation was approached from the viewpoint of the companies. While this choice enabled a deep understanding of strategic and creative considerations, it leaves open the question of how customers themselves perceive their role in the co-creation process. Future research could incorporate consumer interviews, ethnographic methods, or digital content analysis to illuminate the experiential and emotional dimensions of participation. In addition, there is room for further exploration of the relationship between co-creation, community, and loyalty. While this study touched on how values and shared identity strengthen attachment, the broader implications for brand community commitment, particularly in digital spaces, remain a promising area for investigation. As SMEs increasingly navigate global audiences through social media, understanding how co-creation contributes to loyalty, trust, and community cohesion would be both theoretically and managerially valuable.

Conducting this study has shown how deeply personal and value-driven branding can be within fashion SMEs. Engaging with entrepreneurs behind Cuitu and AIDA Impact offered insight into how co-creation is shaped not only by strategic decisions, but also by the lived experiences, intuitions, and commitments of the individuals who carry the brand. While this thesis is grounded in academic analysis, the research process itself has underscored the human, relational, and interpretive nature of co-creation. This aspect is often acknowledged in theory but far more vivid in practice. This reflective understanding strengthens the study's interpretivist orientation and offers an additional layer of meaning to the theoretical insights presented above.

## 7 Summary

The purpose of this thesis was to examine how fashion SMEs engage in collaborative brand co-creation and how these collaborative practices shape brand development within small, value-driven fashion enterprises. The study focused on two Finnish case companies, Cuitu and AIDA Impact, to explore how co-creation appears in practice, what kinds of opportunities and challenges it creates and how it contributes to the development of brand identity, stakeholder relationships and community formation. The study was motivated by the increasing importance of interaction, particularly within the fashion industry where symbolic value, emotional connection and cultural relevance play a central role.

The theoretical framework of the study was built around brand co-creation, value co-creation, service-dominant logic and brand community literature. Together, these perspectives provide a foundation for understanding branding as a relational and socially embedded process rather than as a purely firm-controlled activity. The study also examined how collaborative brand building and brand communities intersect within fashion SMEs, where close stakeholder relationships, authenticity and shared values often function as important competitive advantages. The empirical part of the study was conducted as a qualitative multiple-case study. The research material consisted primarily of semi-structured interviews with the founders of the selected companies and was supported by secondary material, including company websites, public presentations, social media communication and other brand-related content. The material was analysed through thematic analysis, allowing the study to identify recurring themes related to collaboration, community, branding and stakeholder interaction.

The findings of the study indicate that co-creation in fashion SMEs is rarely implemented through highly formalised systems or structured co-design processes. Instead, co-creation appears as an ongoing and relational practice embedded in the everyday activities of the companies. In both case companies, collaboration was strongly connected to values, storytelling and long-term relationship building. The findings suggest that co-creation in fashion SMEs is less about giving stakeholders direct control over branding decisions and more about maintaining continuous dialogue, shared understanding and emotional connection between the brand and its surrounding community.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that co-creation does not necessarily weaken creative control or brand coherence. Both Cuitu and AIDA Impact maintained clear founder-driven identities while still engaging customers, collaborators and community in meaningful ways.

At Cuitu, co-creation emerged especially through collaborations with artists, festivals, companies and local actors, where sustainability, experimentation and material innovation formed the basis for shared value creation. In AIDA Impact, co-creation was more strongly connected to social inclusion, empathy and cultural understanding with collaboration unfolding through storytelling and cultural understanding, with collaboration unfolding through storytelling, emotional resonance and shared values rather than direct customer participation in design decisions.

The study also highlights the important role of brand communities in collaborative brand building. In both cases, communities formed around shared values, authenticity, aesthetic and emotional identification with the brand. Social media and digital communication functioned as important environments where interaction, storytelling and community building could take place continuously. The findings suggest that within fashion SMEs, community is not only an outcome of co-creation but also a condition that enables collaborative engagement and long-term relationship development. In addition, the research identified several challenges related to collaborative brand co-creation. Resource limitations, maintaining brand coherence, balancing openness with creative autonomy and aligning stakeholder expectations emerged as recurring tensions in both companies. However, the research also demonstrates that co-creation created significant opportunities for fashion SMEs including stronger emotional connections with customers, increased authenticity, deeper trust, enhanced visibility and broader cultural relevance within competitive markets.

Overall, this study contributes to previous literature by providing a more context-sensitive understanding of collaborative brand co-creation within fashion SMEs. The findings show that co-creation in creative SMEs is highly relational, interpretive, and value-driven, extending beyond product development into broader processes of storytelling, identity construction, and community formation. The study further suggests that successful co-creation in fashion SMEs depends on balancing participation, authenticity and strategic coherence while maintaining meaningful relationships with stakeholders and communities. In this sense, the thesis highlights how collaborative brand building can function not only as a branding practice, but also as a way of creating long-term cultural and relational value within the contemporary fashion industry.

## References

- Abel Aziz, K. – Saad, N.H.M. (2022) Social media co-creation strategy for SMEs: Key stakeholders' perspectives in Egypt fashion industry. *Smart Innovation, Systems and Technologies*. Vol. 2, 415–429.
- Achrol, R.S. (1991) Evolution of the marketing organization: new forms for dynamic environments. *Journal of Marketing*. Vol. 55 (4), 77–93.
- AIDA Impact Official Website (2025) About AIDA Impact – Our Story and Mission. Available at: <https://aidaimpact.com> (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- Alexander, B. (2016) Small store design and marketing effects: experiential developments in SME fashion pop-up store strategies: New challenges and opportunities. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Alexander, C. (2022) Alabama Chanin and the power of community craft. *Journal of Fashion Business and Sustainability*, 8 (2), 56–72.
- Arvidsson, A. (2005) Brands: A critical perspective. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. Vol. 5 (2), 235–258.
- Asiakastieto (2025) AIDA Group Oy – Company financial information (Business ID 3224575-8) Available at: <https://www.asiakastieto.fi/web/fi/> (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- Asiakastieto (2025) Cuitu Oy – Company financial information (Business ID: 3020761 9). Available at: <https://www.asiakastieto.fi> (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- Astner, L. – Gaddefors, J. (2024) Founders and their brands: how founder identity matters in small firm branding. *Qualitative Market Research*. Vol. 28 (1), 101–121.
- Astner, L. – Gaddefors, J. (2024) Founders and their brands: Authenticity and identity work in small creative enterprises. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*. Vol. 40 (1), 1–15.
- Astner, L. – Gaddefors, J. (2024) Entrepreneurial branding as relational practice: The role of founder values in small firms. *Journal of Business Research*. Vol. 170 (1), 114–126.
- Baldus, B. J. (2018) Leveraging online communities to support the brand and develop the community. *Journal of Internet Commerce*. Vol. 17 (2), 115–144.
- Brodie, R. J. – Glynn, M.S. – Little, V. (2006) The service brand and the service-dominant logic. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*. Vol. 17 (2), 111–122.
- Business Finland (2023) Circular fashion and sustainable textiles in Finland. Available at: <https://www.businessfinland.fi/en/whats-new/cases/2025/circular-economy-in-the-textile-industry-is-getting-stronger-in-finland> (retrieved 28.10.2025).

- Cheung, M.F.Y. – Wong, C.S. (2011) Transformational leadership, leader support, and employee creativity. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*. Vol. 32 (7), 656–672.
- Cova, B. – Pace, S. (2006) Brand community of convenience products: New forms of customer empowerment – The case “My Nutella the Community”. *European Journal of Marketing*. Vol. 40 (9), 1087–1105.
- Cova, B. – Cova, V. (2012) On the road to presumption: Marketing discourse and the development of consumer competencies. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 15 (2), 149–168.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Cuitu, Official Website (2025) About: < <https://wearecuitu.com/pages/cuitu>>, retrieved 17.3.2025.
- Cuitu Official Website (2025) About Cuitu – Sustainability and design philosophy. <https://www.wearecuitu.com>, retrieved 27.10.2025.
- Da Silveira, V. – Simões, M. (2022) *Research handbook on brand co-creation: Theory, practice and ethical implications*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- De Meulenaere, K. – De Boom, L. (2024) Diversity branding by organizations. *Current opinion in psychology*. Vol. 60, Article 101923.
- Diener, E., Crandall, R. (1978) *Ethics in Social and behavioral research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Douce, L. – Janssens, W. (2013) The power of touch: Effects of physical contact on consumer buying behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. Vol. 23 (3), 362–369.
- Doyle, P. (1991) *Marketing management and strategy*. Harlow, England: New York: Financial Times, Prentice Hall.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. & Graebner, M. E. (2007) Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50 (1), 25–32.
- European Commission (2019) *Support report mapping sustainable fashion opportunities for SMES*. Written by Centre for sustainable fashion, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London with Middlesex University, Politecnico di Milano and Institute Français de la Mode. Published May 2019.
- European Commission (2024) *Cultural and Creative Industries*. Available at: [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/cultural-and-creative-industries\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/cultural-and-creative-industries_en) (retrieved 20.1.2025).
- European Commission (2025) *Cultural and Creative Industries in Europe – Key figures and innovation drivers*. Available at: [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/cultural-and-creative-industries\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/cultural-and-creative-industries_en) (retrieved 28.10.2025).

- Eriksson, P. – Kovalainen, A. (2008) *Qualitative methods in business research*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Finder (n.d.) AIDA Group Oy – Jewelry design and contact information. Available at: <https://www.finder.fi/Korut+ja+kellot/Aida+Group+Oy/Helsinki/yhteystiedot/3628336> (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- Finder (n.d.) Cuitu Oy – Design and contact information. Available at: <https://www.finder.fi/Muotoilu+ja+suunnittelu/Cuitu+Oy/Turku/yhteystiedot/3322443> (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- Fletcher, M. & Plakoyianaki, E. (2011) – Case selection in international business: key issues and common misconceptions. In *rethinking the case study in international business and management research*, eds. R. Piekkari & C. Welch, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 171–191.
- Frow, P. – Nenonen, S. – Payne, A. – Storbacka, K. (2015) Managing co-creation design: A strategic approach to innovation *British Journal of Management*. Vol. 26 (3), 463–483.
- Füller, J. (2010) Refining virtual co-creation from a consumer perspective. *California Management Review*. Vol. 52 (2), 98–122.
- Ganesan, S. (1994) Determinants of long-term orientation in buyer-seller relationships. *Journal of Marketing*. Vol. 58 (2), 1–19.
- Grönroos, C. (2008) Service logic revisited: Who creates value? And who co-creates? *European Business Review*. Vol. 20 (4), 298–314.
- Grönroos, C. (2011) Value co-creation in service logic: A critical analysis. *Marketing Theory*, 11(3), 279–301.
- Hatch, M.J. – Schultz, M. (2010) Toward a theory of brand co-creation with implications for brand governance. *Journal of Brand Management*. Vol. 17 (8), 590–604.
- Harc, M. – Bestvina Bukvic, I. – Mijoc, J. (2019) Entrepreneurial and innovative potential of the creative industry. *Interdisciplinary Management Research*. 1562–1577.
- Holt, D.B. (2002) Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding. *Journal of Consumer Research*. Vol 29 (1), 70–90.
- Iglesias, O. – Ind, N. – Schultz, M. (2013) Building brands together. *California Management Review*. Vol. 55 (3), 5–26.
- Iglesias, O. – Ind, N. – Schultz, M. (2017) Building brands together: Emergence and outcomes of co-creation. *California Management Review*, 59(3), 5–29.
- Ind, N. & Coates, N. (2013) The meanings of co-creation. *European Business Review*, 25(1), 86–95.
- Jing, J. – Feng, R. – Li, E.Y. (2021) Uncovering the providers' continuance intention of participation

- in the sharing economy: A Moderated Mediation Model. *Sustainability*, Vol. 13 (9), 5095.
- Joseph, A.R. (1995) Branding: a trend for today and tomorrow. *The Journal of Product & Brand Management*. Vol. 4 (4), 48–55.
- Juntunen, M. (2025) Conceptualizing SME brand co-creation. *International Journal of Management Reviews*. Vol. 27 (2), 261–282.
- Kauppalehti (2025) AIDA Group Oy – Financial overview and business data. Available at: [https://www.kauppalehti.fi/yritykset/yritys/32245758?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.kauppalehti.fi/yritykset/yritys/32245758?utm_source=chatgpt.com) (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- Kazadi, K. – Lievens, A. – Mahr, D. (2016) Stakeholder co-creation during the innovation process: Identifying capabilities for knowledge creation among multiple stakeholders. *Journal of Business Research*. Vol. 69 (2), 525–540.
- Kim, Y.K. – Sullivan P. (2019) Emotional branding speaks to the consumer’s heart: The case of fashion brands. *Fashion and Textiles*, Vol. 6 (1), 1–16.
- Kompass (n.d.) Cuitu Oy – Industrial design company profile (NACE74109). Available at: <https://gb.kompass.com> (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- Krishna, A. (2012) An integrative review of sensory marketing. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. Vol. 22 (3), 332–351.
- Kumar, V. – Pansari, A. (2016) Competitive advantage through engagement. *Journal of Marketing Research*. Vol. 53 (4), 497–514.
- Kumar, V. (2020) Building customer-brand relationships through customer brand engagement. *Journal of Promoting Management*. Vol. 26 (7), 986–1012.
- Kvale, S. – Brinkmann, S. (2009) *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lavoie, C. – Abdounour, G. (2014) How to recognize a creative SME? IFIP International Conference on Advances in Production Management Systems (APMS). 27–33.
- Le, Q.H. – Phan Tan, L. – Hoang, T.H. (2022) Customer brand co-creation on social media: A systematic review. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*. Vol. 40 (8), 1038–1053.
- LinkedIn Cuitu (2025, March) Cuitu x Tree DPP collaboration announcement. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/cuitu> (retrieved 27.10.2025)
- Loureiro, S. M. C. – Serra, J. – Guerreiro, J. (2019) How fashion brands engage on social media: A ethnography approach. *Journal of Promoting Management*. Vol. 25 (3), 367–378.
- Markovic, S. – Gryd-Jones, R. – von Wallach, S. (2022) Establishing the boundaries of brand co-creation. In *Research Handbook on Brand Co-Creation*. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited. Cheltenham, England.

- Markovic, S. – Iglesias, O. – Singh, J.J. – Sierra, V. (2022) Co-creating brand meaning with stakeholders: A stakeholder perspective. *Journal of Business Research*. Vol. 144, 530–540.
- McAlexander, J.H. – Schouten J. – Koenig H.F (2007) Transcendent customer experience and brand community. *Journal of The Academy of Marketing Science*. Vol. 35 (3), 357–368.
- McKinsey & Company (2024) The state of fashion 2025. Available at: Challenges at every turn. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/state-of-fashion> (retrieved 22.1.2025).
- Merz, M.A., He, Y. & Vargo, S.L. (2009) The evolving brand logic: A service-dominant logic perspective. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 37(3), 328–344.
- Millspaugh, J. – Kent, A. (2016) Co-creation and the development of SME designer fashion enterprises. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*. Vol. 20 (3), 322–338.
- Montgomery, C. – Wernerfelt, B. (1992) Risk reduction and umbrella branding. *Journal of Business*. Vol. 65 (1), 31–51.
- Muniz, A.M. – O’Gunn, T.C. (2001) Brand community. *The journal of Consumer Research*. Vol. 27 (4), 412–432.
- Nayak, R. – Thang, L. – Nguyen, T. – Gaimster, J. – Morris, R. – George, M. (2021) Sustainable development and corporate responsibility in Vietnamese fashion enterprises. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*. Vol. 26 (2), 307–327.
- Nibras, S. (2024) Engage to co-create! The drivers of brand co-creation on social commerce. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*.
- Nuoret Nytt (2019) Cuitu wins EIT Raw Materials Circular Economy Award at the Young Entrepreneurs European Championships. Available at: <https://www.nuoretnytt.fi> (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- Payne, A.F., Storbacka, K. & Frow, P. (2008) Managing the co-creation of value. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*. Vol. 36 (1), 83–96.
- Prahalad, C.K. – Ramaswamy, V. (2004) Co-creation experiences: The next practice in value creation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*. Vol. 18 (3), 5–14.
- Prahalad, C.K. & Ramaswamy, V. (2004) *The Future of Competition: Co-Creating Unique Value with Customers*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Proff (2025) Cuitu Oy – Financial reports and company overview. Available at: <https://www.proff.fi> (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- Phil. C (2014) Brands, community and style-exploring linking value in fashion blogging. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*. Vol. 18 (1), 3–19.

- Purwandari, B. – Mishbah, M. – Putra, P. (2022) Collaborative commerce model for SMEs a knowledge and resources sharing mechanism for co-creation. *Desidoc Journal of Library & Information Technology*. Vol. 42 (2), 80–87.
- Rahayu, A. – Krishna Yuliawati, A. – Fakhruddin, S. (2020) Value creation through co-creation and collaboration strategy in SMEs creative industry. *Jurnal Pendidikan Ekonomi & Bisnis*. Vol. 8 (1), 77–85.
- Rowley, J. (2002) Using case studies in research. *Management research news*. Vol. 25 (1), 16–27.
- Santos, Z.R. – Cheung, C.M.K. – Coelho, P.S. (2022) Consumer engagement in social media brand communities: A literature review. *International Journal of Information Management*. Vol. 63, Article 102457.
- Sarasvuo, M. – Nummela, N. Ahokangas, P. – Haapanen, L. (2022) Collaborative brand building: stakeholder-driven co-creation in dynamic markets. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*. Vol. 31 (4), 540 – 555.
- Sarasvuo, S. – Rindell, A. – Kovalchuk, M. (2022) Toward a conceptual understanding of co-creation in branding. *Journal of Business Research*, 136, 543–563.
- Saunders, M. – Lewis, P. – Thornhill, A. (2019) *Research methods for business students* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Shekhar Kumar, R. – Dash, S. – Chandra Purwar, P. (2013) The nature and antecedents of brand equity and its dimensions. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*. Vol. 31 (2), 141–159.
- Siano, A. – Vollero, A. – Bertolini, A. (2022) From brand control to brand co-creation: An integrated framework of brand paradigms and emerging brand perspectives. *Journal of Business Research*. Vol. 152, 372–386.
- Silverman, D. (2013) *Doing qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). London: Sage.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Syvälouma, V. (2024) *Suomalaisbrändit VAIN ja Vitunleija vallittivat New Yorkin muotiviikot*. Available at Klangi: <https://www.klangi.fi/uutiset/suomalaisbrandit-vain-ja-vitunleija-valloittivat-new-yorkin-muotiviikot/> (retrieved 17.3.2025).
- Tarannum, J. – Arfath, J. – Madnoor, P. – Maimoona, B. – Alekhya, M. – Maltunkar, S.L. (2024) A study on importance of branding and its effects on products in business. *International Research Journal on Advanced Engineering and Management*. Vol. 2 (4), 656–661.
- Thompson, C.J. – Ridnfleisch, A. – Arsel, Z. (2006) Emotional branding and the strategic value of the doppelgänger brand image. *Journal of Marketing*. Vol. 70 (1), 50–64.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010) Qualitative equality: Eight” big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*. Vol. 16 (10), 837–851.

- Trusov, M. – Bucklin, R.E. – Pauwels, K. (2009) Effects of word-of-mouth versus traditional marketing: Findings from an internet social networking site. *Journal of Marketing*. Vol. 73 (5), 90–102.
- Turun Sanomat (2024) Cuitu launched its first upcycled accessory from Ursuit’s surplus fabric. Available at: <https://www.ts.fi> (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- Turun Sanomat (2024) Turkulaisen Evi Oivasen yritys pelaa tetristä ylijäämätekstiileillä ja etsii ulkomaisia rahoittajia –” Suomessa sijoitetaan mieluummin teknologiaan”. Available at: <https://www.ts.fi/uutiset/6343952> (retrieved 13.3.2025).
- Vainu (n.d.) Cuitu Oy – Company data and financial overview (FI30207619) Available at: <https://haku.vainu.com> (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- Vargo, S.L. – Lush, R.F. (2004) Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of Marketing*. Vol. 68 (1), 1–17.
- Vargo, S.L. – Lush, R.F. (2004) The four service marketing myths: Remnants of a goods-based, manufacturing model. *Journal of Service Research*. Vol. 6 (4) 324–335.
- Williams, L.J. – Hazer, J.T. (1986) Antecedents and consequences of satisfaction and commitment in turnover models: a reanalysis using latent variable structural equation methods. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Vol. 71 (2), 219–231.
- Wilson, B. – J Levy, S. (2012) A History of the Concept of Branding: Practice and Theory. *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* Vol. 4 (3), 47–368.
- Won-Moo, H. – Kwang-Ho, A. – Minsung, K. (2011) Building brand loyalty through managing brand community commitment. *Management Decision*. Vol. 49 (7), 1194–1213.
- Yin, R. K. (1994) *Case study research: design and methods*. 2nd edition. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks.
- Yin R.K. (2003) *Design and methods. Case study research*. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks.
- Yle Kulttuuri (2023) Suomen muodin kuuma lupaus Jimi Vain, 24, esitteli mallistonsa maailman tärkeimmässä muotitapahtumassa. Available at: <https://yle.fi/a/74-20012550> (retrieved 17.3.2025).
- Yrittäjä-lehti, Varsinais-Suomi (2022) Cuitu’s international collaboration with BYBORRE expands to Amsterdam. Available at: <https://www.yrittajat.fi> (retrieved 27.10.2025).
- 032c Official Website (2025) About 032c – Brand philosophy, collections and creative projects. Available at: <https://www.032c.com> (retrieved 17.3.2025).

## Appendices

### *Appendix 1 Interview Guide*

#### **Background questions about the interviewee**

- Q: Could you tell a bit about yourself? What is your role in the company?
- Q: How long have you worked in the industry, and what does your job involve?
- Q: How did you end up in this field or in your current position?
- Q: What motivates you in your work?
- Q: Have you been involved in any significant changes or development processes within the organization?
- Q: What is your role from the perspective of customer collaboration or brand development?
- Q: How do you see your own influence on the company's brand?
- Q: How has your view of the brand changed during your time working here?
- Q: What has been the most memorable project you've been involved in?

#### **Background questions about the company**

- Q: In what year was your company founded?
- Q: How large is your company in terms of number of employees?
- Q: Who owns your company?
- Q: How would you describe what your company does, in your own words?
- Q: In what kind of business environment does your company operate?
- Q: How would you describe your company's operating philosophy?
- Q: What values does your company emphasize in its everyday work?
- Q: How has your company's brand evolved over the years?
- Q: What are your company's key objectives at the moment?
- Q: What kinds of development challenges or opportunities do you see in the near future?
- Q: How do you aim to respond to changing customer and societal expectations?

#### **Customer collaboration and co-creation of the brand**

Q: How does your company collaborate with customers?

- How does collaboration begin – at the initiative of the customer or the company?
- Does the collaboration take place with individual customers or customer groups?
- At what stage of the brand or product process is the customer involved?

Q: In what areas can customers influence your products or brand?

- Can customers participate in visual identity, storytelling, or value proposition?
- What about details related to product features or materials?
- Could you give concrete examples of such influence?

Q: Who are your most important customer groups, and how do they participate in your company's development?

- Do you aim to collaborate with all customers or selected ones?
- How are these customer groups chosen for collaboration?

- Do you seek continuous or campaign-based collaboration with customers?

### **Strategic significance of customer collaboration**

**Q:** Do you see customer collaboration in your company as more of a natural interaction or a consciously managed strategy? Could you give examples?

- If it is strategic: who leads it, and how is it planned?
- If it is spontaneous: how is it still utilized in business operations?

**Q:** What benefits does your company gain from customer collaboration? And what do customers gain from it?

- Has customer collaboration increased brand awareness or loyalty?
- Do customers gain visibility, influence, or products in return?

**Q:** Is there another company whose customer collaboration you admire or take inspiration from?

- If yes, what aspects of their approach do you value?
- Have you applied anything from their model to your own operations?

### **Brand building and community**

**Q:** Can you give examples of situations where customers have influenced the development of your company's brand?

- How did the customer influence, for instance, brand values, visual identity, or communication?
- How was this reflected in the result?

**Q:** Do you consciously aim to build customer collaboration around your brand? If yes, how?

- Do you have programs or campaigns for this purpose?
- How do you engage customers in the long term?

**Q:** How is social media used in customer collaboration and community building?

- Do you ask customers for ideas or feedback on social media?
- Do you use customer-generated content, for example?

**Q:** What methods do you use to strengthen customer engagement and loyalty?

- Do you have loyalty programs, events, or benefits for active followers?
- How do you measure customer engagement?

### **Challenges and opportunities**

**Q:** Could you describe an example of a successful customer collaboration situation? Why did it work well?

- What factors made it successful – trust, communication?
- How were the results reflected in the brand or product?

**Q:** What are the biggest challenges in implementing customer collaboration and co-creation of the brand?

- Is it difficult to find the right collaboration partners?
- Do you experience conflicts between the company's and customers' perspectives?

**Q:** Does your company have plans to develop customer collaboration in the future? What kind?

- For example, do you aim to expand collaboration internationally?
- What about utilizing technology?

### **Final questions**

**Q:** How do you see the role of customer collaboration in your company's future?

- Do you believe its importance will grow or change?
- In what areas could customers be more involved?

**Q:** If you could change something about your customer collaboration, what would it be?

- What has been the biggest lesson so far?
- What would you do differently now compared to before?

### *Appendix 2 Declaration of the use of artificial intelligence in this thesis*

Used tool: OpenAI ChatGPT (GPT-4o version, 2025 version available through the ChatGPT platform)

In this master's thesis the artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT was used as a supportive tool during the research process. I confirm that AI tools were used with appropriate academic care and transparency in accordance with the University of Turku guidelines, and I take full responsibility for the entire content of this thesis. AI assistance was used to provide support in structuring and organizing the interview material by helping to establish an analytical framework for the overall body of data collected and to organise preliminary bullet points and initial observation. In addition, AI assisted in reviewing and refining the wording of the operationalisation table to ensure clarity and appropriateness of academic language. ChatGPT tools were also used during the final stages of the writing process to assist in checking the formatting and consistency of references in accordance with the University of Turku's academic guidelines.

ChatGPT was further used for language support, including improving clarity, grammas, and academic tone of text writing. In addition, AI tools were used to correct spelling and grammatical errors and to

identify suitable synonyms during the writing process to avoid repetition while keeping an academic tone. The use of AI did not replace the own analytical work, and all interpretations, theoretical connections, empirical analysis and conclusions are the authors own productions.

Example prompt 1:

“How can I improve the structure of the conclusion chapter to reduce repetition between theoretical conclusions and contribution to previous literature while maintaining academic coherence?”

Example prompt 2:

“Please review this reference list according to the University of Turku academic writing guidelines and identify inconsistencies in formatting and citation style.”

AI-generated suggestions were used selectively and only when considered academically appropriate. All empirical analysis, theoretical interpretation, methodological decisions and final conclusions are the author’s own work.